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THE INDEPENDENT

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BERNARD
DIVISION

MONDAY 3 FEBRUARY 1997

WEATHER: Cold and grey

(IR45p) 40p

COMMENT

Polly Toynbee: why I loathe Portillo's mean tribe

THE TABLOID

Peter Gabriel: inside his interactive world

SPORT

England triumph: in the 20-page sports tabloid



Haunting reminder: Marchers passing under pictures depicting the faces of the 14 people who died in the Bloody Sunday shootings in Londonderry 25 years ago during yesterday's anniversary march. New inquiry call, page 2

Photograph: Peter Macdiarmid

Euro plan will cut Britain out

Sarah Helm
Brussels

Exclusive

France and Germany have agreed to set up a powerful new political body to make European economic policy, which would exclude Britain if it stays outside the single currency.

After months of secret negotiations, France and Germany have hammered out agreement on a "stability council" to govern the euro zone, senior officials in Bonn have told *The Independent*.

Under the deal, both sides have pledged that no formal announcement on the shape of the council will be made until near the launch of monetary union.

But details obtained by *The Independent* confirm British government fears that exclusion

states, will also reach agreements amongst themselves on enforcement of the rules and fines governing the euro-zone, under the stability pact. The future European central bank may be invited to meetings of the stability council, which are expected to take place several times a year. They will probably happen just before the regular meetings of the European Union's finance ministers council in Brussels or Luxembourg.

Officials say it has not yet been decided whether to invite the European Commission to sit on the stability council, which looks certain to become the most powerful economic club in Europe, after the single currency launch in 1999. The council will be styled on the G7, the Group of Seven industrial nations, and will meet regularly to set strategy on exchange rates, employment and issues such as tax harmonisation. German officials say.

The council, consisting of finance ministers of the EMU

for the euro-zone, saying the idea could threaten the independence of the future central bank. The commission is opposed to any informal power centre which could undermine its influence over European policy.

However, following months of intense negotiations between France and Germany, a compromise over the stability council has now been struck. "We now have agreement on how the council will work," said a senior German official. Both the German Bundesbank and the European Monetary Institute, the central bank in waiting, are understood to have accepted the blueprint.

Speaking at the world economic forum in Davos, Switzerland, at the weekend, Theo Waigel, the German Finance Minister, and Jean-Claude Trichet, governor of the French central bank for the first time publicly voiced strong support for the idea.

They said that the stability council would coordinate policy among governments inside the euro-zone. "This kind of body makes sense for countries in the third stage of economic and currency union," said Mr Waigel, referring to the single currency launch. A stability council would be an informal body with no decision-making power," he added, playing down fears that the council could become a serious political counter-weight to the central bank. The Franco-German deal will fuel fears in Britain that a "hard-core" Europe is evolving which could lead to Britain's permanent isolation.

Kenneth Clarke, the Chancellor, has said he is "wary" of any plan for a stability council which would exclude countries

outside EMU. Mr Clarke has argued that economic policymaking for the euro-zone should be set by the council of European finance ministers, on which Britain has a seat.

The stability council, however, will operate outside the EU treaties, which means Britain will have no power to influence discussions. Britain's partners are showing increasing frustration with the Government's intransigence over further power-sharing and have now shown they are determined to move ahead alone, even if this means pooling more powers outside the treaties.

"If Britain is worried about isolation they should join in monetary union," said one senior German source. The Franco-German deal involved a

compromise from Bonn and Paris over the powers of the new council. French integrationists wanted the council to be granted decision-making authority with direct political powers to influence the European central bank. However, Germany insisted that nothing would be done which affected the bank's independence and its sole right to agree monetary policy, as set out under the Maastricht treaty.

As a result it was agreed that the stability council should be set up without any institutional structure or formal powers, and without a secretariat. Bonn has, however, accepted that the council will enter into "dialogue" with the central bank which cannot "act in a political vacuum", Bonn officials say.

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NHS patients being left to starve

Ian Burrell

Patients are being left to starve in hospitals because they are unable to feed themselves, according to a disturbing report to be published today.

Relatives have complained that some patients have been left to die because they are unable to reach their food. Sick children and young but seriously disabled patients have also been left to starve.

The report, by official health watchdogs, has been sent to Stephen Dorrell, the Health Secretary. It blames the fall in the number of nurses, changes in hospital catering arrangements and lack of staff training in the value of nutrition for the "very disturbing problem".

The Independent has seen a copy of the report which follows a ten-month national inquiry by

If you were expected to recover, you ate, if not, you were left to fade away

There was a policy on that ward if you were expected to recover, you were helped to eat, if not, you were left to fade away.

Another, from Wakefield: "My father would not have refused artificial feeding, he was compliant with anything that was asked of him by doctors. I am distraught that my father should have been

abandoned in this way." The report concludes: "Patients going hungry in hospital is a very emotive subject, particularly when someone dies. There is clear evidence that this is a very real problem that can affect everyone going into hospital, not just elderly people."

Angeline Burke, the study's author, writes that hired caterers staff often have sole responsibility for feeding patients.

"They are not always made aware of the specific needs and requirements of individuals and are not expected to ask patients if they need assistance or why they have left a meal."

One relative told the study:

"Her meals were simply dumped in front of her on bed-table, in extremely hot covered steel dishes, and being blind as well as elderly and unwell, she was not even able to

find her food, let alone remove the hot covers and discover what she had."

Another relative, in Newcastle, said: "Even when the table was in front of my mother she could not feed herself properly and we found her more than once eating with her hands. When she did manage to get food to her mouth half of it would fall out."

Some staff admitted they had contributed to the problem. A community nurse from Leicester told the study: "I confess I have been one of those nurses who have placed food on the patient's bedsheet, but with every good intention of returning to help. Why did I not return?"

The study points out that the number of registered nurses on hospital wards has fallen dramatically - in 1983, 37,000 regis-

tered nurses qualified and it is estimated that only 9,000 will qualify by 1997-98.

The report notes: "Many CHCs, relatives and other patients' representatives believe that the withdrawal of nurses has gone too far. Trained nurses, not volunteers or relatives should be responsible for ensuring that patients eat and drink enough when they are in hospital."

The problem is not confined to general hospitals. Aylesbury Vale CHC, which monitors the National Spinal Injuries Centre, voiced serious concerns.

"Many [patients] are young people with healthy appetites despite their disability and yet we have experienced patients having to wait for meals because there are insufficient staff to feed patients who are totally dependent," a spokesman said.

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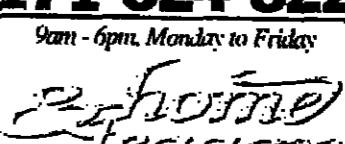
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Lloyd Webber's *Sunset* show reaches the end of its boulevard

David Lister
Arts News Editor

Sunset Boulevard, the Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, is to close in both London and New York, it was announced yesterday.

The surprise decision was made by the Really Useful Group over the weekend. It marks an ominous start to the year for musical theatres, with the West End musical of *The Who's Tommy* also closing because of a fall off in audiences.

Already this year Sir Andrew has seen a postponement of the Broadway opening of his newest musical *Whistle Down The Wind* following a lukewarm reaction to its Washington opening. And he has reduced the 95-strong cast by 18, including senior executives.

He was not commenting yesterday on the shock closure of *Sunset Boulevard*. But James Thane, head of the Really Useful Theatre Company, said it

million people over four years, it is noticeable that tickets have been easier to buy recently as the public's appetite for musicals has lessened. Sir Cameron Mackintosh's *Martin Guerre* had to be revamped last year after failing to attract audiences.

In New York the production of *Sunset Boulevard* has not attracted audiences in sufficient numbers, and it was reported to have lost £200,000 in one month. It will close in March. The London production will close on 5 April.

The production of *Sunset Boulevard*, directed by Trevor Nunn, soon to be head of the National Theatre, contains one of Sir Andrew's best scores and has won critical plaudits. Yet it has a troubled history. The £3.5m-plus show was closed after a few months for further £1m to be spent on it. The first Norma Desmond, the actress Patti LuPone, fell out with Sir Andrew after she was not given the New York transfer. For the Los Angeles opening there was an even more public falling-

out between Sir Andrew and the proposed Norma, the film star Faye Dunaway, after Lloyd Webber failed to be satisfied with her singing ability.

While the history of the production could almost make a musical in itself, the official reason being given for closure yesterday seemed strange even by show business standards. The role of Norma Desmond is a demanding one, but there is no shortage of fine musical theatre actresses, and this was clearly a show intended to run for some years.

James Thane said: "We have decided to end the show on a high starring Petula Clark. In the character of Norma Desmond, Andrew Lloyd Webber has created one of the most demanding female roles ever in musical theatre. This makes casting incredibly difficult. The public expect a certain stature of the artist in the role and to continue beyond Petula's contract would risk compromising an extraordinary series of bravura performances."



Shearer three-timer

Alan Shearer (above) scored three times in the last 13 minutes yesterday as Newcastle came back from 3-1 down to win 4-3 at home against Leicester City. His scoring feats could cost bookmakers a small fortune. Shearer is now five teams away from scoring against every team in the Premiership this season - a feat quoted at 500-1 back in August. Sport tabloid

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news

Kate Winslet senses another film triumph

David Lister
Arts News Editor

The star of *Michael Collins*, the controversial film about the murdered IRA hero, took one of the top prizes at a film-awards ceremony last night.

Liam Neeson was voted best actor by the jury of film critics at the *Evening Standard* Film Award.

The award of best actress went to Kate Winslet, enjoying remarkable success for an actress who is still only 21.

The awards celebrate British film-making, and this year there was considerable diversity to celebrate, with award-winners including films of Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy, tales of underclass junkies and an IRA leader, and a star of the Carry On movies.

Liam Neeson received his award from the American actress Jessica Lange. The Neil Jordan film, a joint UK/US production, opened last year to controversy, with claims that it had glamorised the life and career of Collins.

The award for best film went to *Richard III*, which featured Sir Ian McKellen's interpretation of the king as a neo-fascist. Tony Burroughs, production designer on the film, won best technical achievement award.

The rise to stardom of Kate Winslet, unknown 18 months ago, continues.

Winslet, who was nominated for an Oscar last year for *Sense and Sensibility*, won best actress last night for her performances in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Jude*, the latter an adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*.

She is currently starring as Ophelia in the Kenneth Branagh film of *Hamlet*.

Emma Thompson, who adapted *Sense and Sensibility* (as well as acting in it), shared best screenplay award with John



Emma Thompson (left) in *Sense and Sensibility* with Kate Winslet, who was voted best actress for her roles in the Austen adaptation and in *Jude the Obscure*

Hodge for *Trainspotting*, the film of Irvine Welsh's story of Edinburgh low life.

Mark Herman, writer and director of *Brassed Off*, a film about a colliery band at a pit earmarked for closure, won the Peter Sellers comedy award, and

Emily Watson was judged best newcomer for *Breaking the Waves*, an epic love story between a Calvinist girl from a small Scottish community and an oil-rig worker.

The jury of British film critics somewhat perversely ig-

nored one of the great British successes of the year, Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies*, the poignant and comic tale of an adopted black girl who traces her natural mother and finds she is white. This film won top prize at the Cannes Film Festi-

tival last year. It is not the first time that the judges for this award have made an odd decision.

A few years ago they ignored Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*, which won an Oscar.

But one of the biggest cheer-

ers of the night was for Leslie Phillips, when the veteran actor and a star of the Carry On films received the special achievement award. It was presented to him by Joan Plowright, the actress and widow of Lord Olivier.

Hotel grades made easy

significant shorts

Two men held after £4m heroin haul

Two men are due to appear in court today after customs and police officers said they had seized heroin worth £4m in a combined operation.

Sarwan Gill Singh, 61, of Leeds, West Yorkshire, and Gurcharan Singh, 46, also of Leeds, were yesterday charged with being knowingly concerned with the import of 20kg of the drug. The two men, who are not related, will face magistrates at Leeds. Sarwan Singh's wife, Baljita, was released on police bail.

Police said yesterday that they were arrested last Friday after a six-week operation in Leeds.

Not a penny of their own

The number of unemployed 16- and 17-year-olds without any income has increased by 34,000 over the past year, a report showed yesterday.

Those out of work and receiving no benefit has reached 160,500, according to an analysis of government figures by the Unemployment Unit and Youthaid. The figures, for the three months to November 1996, mean that 89 per cent of all unemployed 16- and 17-year-olds have no form of income, said the report.

The total number of 16- and 17-year-olds without a job was 181,000, the highest figure ever recorded for an autumn quarter.

Hotel grades made easy

The English Tourist Board yesterday announced the adoption of a single five-star ratings system for hotels in a move aimed at ending years of confusion over the quality of rooms and services. The system, using the internationally recognised five stars, will cover all hotels with a similar scheme for bed-and-breakfasts, guesthouses, farmhouses and inns. It takes into account the quality of accommodation, yet emphasises the facilities provided, offering a single integrated star rating.

The Wales Tourist Board is expected to adopt a similar system, but the Scottish Tourist Board is continuing with its own scheme, which already covers four-fifths of hotels north of the border, stresses quality over facilities such as room service and whether rooms have televisions.

The English scheme was agreed with the Automobile Association and the Royal Automobile Club, which have been running rival ratings schemes offering different types of gradings based on varying criteria. Details of the new gradings still have to be worked out, but the ETB has already pencilled in 2000 for its launch.

Belfast murder charge

A 29-year-old man has been charged with the murder of a man found beaten to death in an alleyway in east Belfast. The accused from the Cregagh area of east Belfast is due before Belfast magistrates today, the Royal Ulster Constabulary said.

Gary McKinnon, 33, of Castlereagh Parade, was found with severe head and body injuries in an alleyway off the Cregagh Road last Friday.

Caver seriously injured

A seriously injured man was airlifted to hospital after plunging 90ft in a moorland cave yesterday.

The 37-year-old was exploring Irby Fell Cavern in Lancashire but near Ingleton, North Yorkshire, when he fell.

Emergency first aid was given to him by members of the Bolton Cave Rescue organisation before he was hoisted to the surface. A helicopter from RAF Leconfield then carried him to the Royal Preston Hospital where his condition was described as "quite serious".

Appetite whetter

The River Thames will acquire its largest restaurant boat when *The Silver Sturgeon*, a multi-million pound vessel, is launched next April.

The 1,000-tonne, 200ft long luxury boat will cruise through London offering facilities for up to 400 passengers. It is being built at George Prior Engineering at Lowestoft in Suffolk and will be launched in Docklands in east London. With three air-conditioned bars, two restaurants, two dance floors, a wine cellar, and extensive promenade decks, the new vessel will be the flagship of the Woods River Cruises' fleet. "I want to introduce a new era of cruising on the Thames," said the company's managing director, Alan Woods. The company already operates three river boats - *The Silver Bonito*, *The Silver Dolphin* and *The Silver Barracuda*.

Mothers' dilemma

The children of women who work full time are twice as likely to fail their GCSEs as those whose mothers spend more time at home, according to new research.

The findings are featured in BBC1's edition of *Panorama* tonight, which claims the number of women in Britain in full-time employment has risen by 66 per cent since 1984. Professor Margaret O'Brien, who carried out the research with a team from North London University, said they found 11 per cent of children whose mothers worked part time left school with no GCSEs. That more than doubled among children whose mothers worked full time to 25 per cent. While 49 per cent of children with mothers working part-time passed five or more exams, only 33 per cent of children of full-time working mothers scored as many passes. All 600 of the families in the study had fathers in full-time work.

Professor O'Brien said the findings were "disturbing" and flouted the research team's expectation that children with two working parents would have better opportunities.

£22.6m lottery jackpot

Nine tickets shared last Saturday's £22.6m National Lottery jackpot, each getting £2,512,517. The winning numbers were 12, 48, 36, 20, 28, 16. The bonus ball was 34.

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Christian Wolmar and Sam Coates

Ministers have agreed to hire a private company at a cost of up to £15m, to raise money for the Millennium Exhibition which, according to a survey by *The Independent*, is failing to attract interest from major British companies.

IMG, which raises sponsorship money for the Olympics, has been hired to bring in the £150m needed to ensure the future of the scheme.

While IMG's expertise is seen as essential, it comes at a high price. Colin Tweedy, director general of the Association of Business Sponsorship of the Arts, said: "IMG is absolutely essential. Without them, Millennium Central would not have a car in hell's chance of getting the money. With them, they've got a good chance, but it will be very expensive. Normally, they charge between 5 and 10 per cent (£7.5m to £15m) but possibly as Millennium Central is government-backed, they might get it cheaper."

A survey conducted by *The Independent* found that 40 of Britain's largest companies, including

spokesman for the Royal & Sun Alliance Insurance Group, which will not be supporting the dome in any way, said: "It is not the most effective way for us to talk to our customers". Mining company RTZ said: "we have a firm policy on what we spend money on in that sort of area: we aim to set up long term partnerships in education, environment and world affairs."

Others, such as Guinness and Standard Chartered, said that most of their business is conducted overseas and it is inappropriate to support events in Britain.

Even many of those companies supporting the project will be making only small donations. For example, Michael Heseltine announced in July of last year that top city institutions, such as Barclays, Midland and NatWest would be joining the City of London Corporation in supporting the Millennium. In fact they have jointly agreed to sponsor a pavilion in one of the 12 "time zones" under the new Greenwich dome. The pavilion will cost around £12m, half of which is being paid for by the City of London, leaving about a dozen banks and city institutions contributing a total of just

£6m towards the government's scheme. Similarly, a spokesman for the Woolwich building society, which is committed in principle to giving some money to the exhibition, said: "our contribution will be very small".

Further bad news for the organisers came from British Telecom. While the company is planning to make one of the most substantial contributions, thought to be approaching £12m, it has asked that none goes toward the Greenwich dome or any other London project. A spokesman for the company said: "our interest is very specifically with the broader national celebrations".

Several other companies, especially those based outside the capital, have refused to support the London project, instead opting to give money to regional projects. Railtrack has donated £4m towards the Hungerford Bridge project, and Severn Trent Water will be donating money to water projects in Birmingham.

IMG is likely to focus on the very big multinationals, rather than these reluctant British companies. Mr Tweedy said: "You really need some big players. It's a lot of money."

With the emergence of new evidence, claiming that there were other soldiers involved and that the nationalist crowd had been fired on from above as well as from the paratroopers on the ground, a full-scale interna-

tional investigation, along the lines of the Mitchell Commission, may be considered.

Before the anniversary march, which attracted the largest crowd ever to commemorate the deaths, Mr Hume made an impassioned plea for peace. He said the abandonment of violence was the best tribute that could be paid to the 14 victims. Mr Hume is co-ordinating new evidence to present to the Government and said he was hopeful there would be a fresh inquiry soon.

Mitchel McLaughlin, a senior Sinn Fein member, called for "the truth about Bloody Sunday" to be brought out in the open.

The marchers included relatives of the men who died. The route followed that of the 1972 demonstration from the Creggan Estate to Free Derry Corner.

Michael McKinney, whose brother was one of those shot dead by the paratroopers, said the outcry over Bloody Sunday would not go away. "Sir Patrick Mayhew [the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland] can keep his head in the sand for as long as he wants, but when he gets up again, the relatives of Bloody Sunday will still be here to spoil his day."

The findings are featured in BBC1's edition of *Panorama* tonight, which claims the number of women in Britain in full-time employment has risen by 66 per cent since 1984.

Professor Margaret O'Brien, who carried out the research with a team from North London University, said they found 11 per cent of children whose mothers worked part time left school with no GCSEs. That more than doubled among children whose mothers worked full time to 25 per cent.

While 49 per cent of children with mothers working part-time passed five or more exams, only 33 per cent of children of full-time working mothers scored as many passes. All 600 of the families in the study had fathers in full-time work.

Professor O'Brien said the findings were "disturbing" and flouted the research team's expectation that children with two working parents would have better opportunities.

Creator of 'Archers' dies



Labour could enter the single currency by 2002, Cook says

Colin Brown
Chief Political Correspondent

certainly hold the position of being outside of the single currency and after all probably half of the countries of the European Union are going to be outside any first wave, even if that wave does start in 1999 which is doubtful.

In the long run, if we are outside a single currency, people in Tokyo, people in Dallas, making inward investment decisions are more likely to look at the inner core within the currency rather than those outside and that was what Toyota was warning about this week."

Pressed on what he meant by the "long run", he added: "I said if it goes ahead and if it succeeds, in other words if it is stable then you cannot stay out."

Asked how long would it take to make that judgement, Mr Cook went on: "I think that is a period which you don't have to prescribe in advance but there is one milestone along the way, which is 2002 when you enter the retail phase. I think it would take a very sober and serious calculation to stay out beyond 2002."

He coupled his remarks with the prospect of a Labour government using a more positive approach to Europe to slow the pace of political integration.

"What is required is if you want to provide any different kind of vision for the future of Europe is for Britain to be taken seriously as a full player and possibly someone who could possibly articulate and lead the other member states," he said.

"France and Germany are not the only country in the European Union. If there are proposals which are emerging from France and Germany which are unacceptable or damaging to the people of Britain - we have yet to see what those might be - there is not a necessary majority for them alone."

John Major, who is due to set out the Government's opposition to the European Social Chapter tomorrow in a keynote speech in Belgium, is being pressed by the party's campaign advertisers to fight the election on Europe, in spite of reservations by party leaders, who fear it would backfire on the Tories.

It could give Labour some difficulties today with the start of the Wirral South by-election campaign, although the splits in the Tory party resurfaced as Sir George Gardiner, the leading Euro-sceptic Tory MP who was deselected from his seat in Reigate, announced he would fight for reinstatement. Sir George, who is threatening legal action, denied he would stand as an independent, saying he expected to be the official Conservative candidate.



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'Intelligent food' about to hit the menu

US company launching products that target specific health complaints. Louise Jury reports

Sensible eating can alleviate common complaints which often need a visit to the doctor and it may soon be possible to buy specially prepared food which "cure" high blood pressure.

A guide published today by the Women's Nutritional Advisory Service (WNAS) claims its programme of healthy eating could alleviate a wide range of problems, while "intelligent food" is the alternative solution from Campbell Soup in America. A range of frozen meals delivered to customers' homes and designed to fulfil all the major health guidelines on fat, fibre and nutrient levels are the

latest products in what have become known as "neutraceuticals". They are marketed in the US as a food "cure" for conditions such as high blood pressure where diet is a factor.

And the range is likely to be introduced in Britain, although the claims will have to be modified under the UK's strict medical licensing laws. In the meantime, the WNAS more modestly aims to tackle 120 common conditions, including migraines, period pains and fatigue, through its own food programme, while blaming GPs for providing women with inadequate dietary information.

A spokeswoman said nine in 10 family doctors had little nutritional knowledge because fewer than four hours of lectures were devoted to diet during training. They were woefully ignorant about the value of healthy eating.

"It is therefore not surprising that women are often fobbed off with inadequate treatment, or worse still, labelled as psychi-

atrically unwell," she said. "The result is that for many women, the appalling quality of their health severely disrupts their enjoyment of life, and indeed their ability to cope with every day commitments."

Doctors defended themselves against the claim yesterday. Dr Brian Goss, a member of the British Medical Association's GPs' committee, said GPs had to cover a huge amount during training, but dietary advice was always available to the GP and to the patient if necessary from qualified dieticians. He added: "There's not much that is solely dietary. There may be a whole host of other facts. It depends on the condition."

Dr Marian Latchman, a family doctor in Suffolk with four children, said it was unfair to blame GPs. "One of the things that has made me most respondent in more than 15 years as a GP has been that however you dress up advice to alter diet and move away from junk, it's usually totally ineffectual.

When you give out dietary advice, eyes go into glaze mode."

She said she could not bear to go to the supermarket between October and January

because of the piles of chocolate and cakes which she knew her patients were buying and consuming.

"Whatever I do in my own little way, I cannot match what is going on in the supermarket. I cannot change dietary patterns at all and it is a sad day for GPs when yet another group of people turn and round and knock

foods to produce specific physiological benefits, aim at enabling people to eat themselves well. The supermarket chain Tesco was among those who two years ago began to introduce products such as margarine with fish oil that reduces blood fat levels.

Although dieticians argue a balanced diet should provide all the nutrients required, many are impressed by some of the results of the neutraceuticals.

But Mrs Daniels said that sometimes they were more expensive than normally available foodstuffs and contained more additives.



'Uncomfortable': Labour spokeswoman Margaret Beckett at Notre Dame high school in Norwich

It was good enough for Prescott and Beckett. It was compulsory for Blair. So Labour in power will bring it back: school uniform

Claire Garner

David Blunkett could not stand his cap, Margaret Beckett did not really care for the colours, and Clare Short did not go a bundle on her boater.

For John Prescott, the party's deputy leader, life at Ellesmere Port secondary modern meant smart uniformity, while in the rather more refined surroundings of Fettes College, Edinburgh where his leader, Tony Blair, was educated, there was never been any question that uniforms were *de rigueur*.

But the Labour frontbenchers all agree that, whatever their own experiences, uniforms are just the thing for today's children. The Shadow Cabinet is keen to replace designer labels in the classroom with something more akin to school badges. Compulsory uniforms have been in decline since the Sixties, and the classroom, they say, is in danger of becoming a fashion parade.

Mr Blunkett, Labour's education spokesman announced yesterday that the party was considering reintroducing school uniform into state schools as part of its drive for greater parental power in education.

No sooner had he outlined his vision for colour co-ordinated classrooms, than a Conservative MP accused him of "gross hypocrisy". Graham Riddick, MP for Colne Valley and a member of the Commons education and employment committee, pointed out that in 1981 Mr Blunkett, as leader of Sheffield City Council, backed a motion preventing schools insisting on uniforms for pupils. "He did one thing while in



John Prescott (left) in uniform at the age of seven; Right, a young Tony Blair at Fettes College, Edinburgh

the safe socialist citadel in Sheffield and says quite another in his effort to target middle-class votes at the general election," Mr Riddick said.

Mr Blunkett last night admitted that he had indeed voted against compulsory uniforms 16 years ago. "At the time people thought it was the right decision in view of the fact that kids had been sent home for wearing the wrong coloured socks," he said. "Sixteen years on, we're talking about a code of dress in a different era with designer clothes which have transformed the expense for parents.

Mr Blunkett's own uniform "involved khaki". "My problem was that the school uniform was pretty scruffy," he said. "This is why I'm advocating some

designer clothes which they were all after. They want the actual brand-name stuff, so they get the label on it ... It's really a rip-off. Obviously they are still into it for weekend and evening wear, but that doesn't put the same strain on."

Margaret Beckett, Labour's trade and industry spokeswoman, recalled her uniform at Notre Dame high school in Norwich with little relish. "It was uncomfortable and expensive," she said. "Like most kids, I didn't care for it very much. Uniforms always feel mis-matched, don't they?"

But it need not be like that, Mrs Beckett felt sure. "I'm sure you can get good and modern school uniform that isn't any of those things."

Clare Short, spokeswoman on overseas development, wore a navy-blue school blazer with the school's motto, "The pen is mightier than the sword", and a matching pinafore dress. The image of St Paul's Grammar School for Girls in Birmingham, lives on.

"I see my former self walking about the town," Ms Short said. Like her Shadow Cabinet colleagues, Ms Short expressed disbelief at the quirky rules which governed her school wardrobe.

"At 16 you were so grown-up you couldn't fit your body into a pinafore. You could wear a skirt. In fact, you had to wear a skirt, and then you could wear nylons."

She is in favour of a reintroduction of uniforms, not least for the children's sake, saying: "There is so much pressure to grow up and the sexualisation of youngsters is so great that if schools are able to be a bit of a haven from that, that's a good thing."

The lunch at No 10 and England's final indignity

Clive White

An invitation to lunch with the Prime Minister at Downing Street next week was behind the hurried announcement on Friday night by Uefa, European football's governing body, that it was backing Germany rather than England in their bid to stage the 2006 World Cup finals.

The subject of World Cup candidacy was not even on the original agenda at last week's Uefa meeting in Lisbon. But it was suggested by those due to attend the lunch on Wednesday week - when England meet Italy in a crucial World Cup tie - that it might save some embarrassment to know beforehand what Uefa's stance was.

Only then did it emerge that Uefa had promised some two years ago to back Germany's bid. Hence the Friday night fax to the Football Association's headquarters at Lancaster Gate.

The machinations of last week's meeting were revealed yesterday by one of its observers, David Will, Scotland's Fifa vice-president, who said: "There was certainly no underhand dealing. A number of members had received an invitation to meet Mr Major and wanted to discuss the World Cup bid, so it was added to the agenda.

"Now England have joined the race but Uefa feels that hav-

ing said that to Germany is committed."

However, the FA, encouraged by their success in staging the European championships last summer, is determined to press on with their £10m bid in the hope that Fifa, the world governing body, will consider both bids. Uefa's general secretary, Gerhard Aigner, one of two Germans on the executive committee in Lisbon, said that the association would like to see the rules changed so that only one bid from each continent was permissible.

Prominent Fifa representatives will be among those invited to next week's lunch, when the home bid will be officially launched. It promises to be even more lively than that evening's match at Wembley. While the tabloids, inevitably, are turning it into an England-Germany confrontation, the dispute is really with Uefa. An election may be imminent but the major parties are united in their desire to bring the World Cup back to England for the first time since 1966 when England beat Germany in the final.

"No other country," said John Major, "can put together the combination of historic links and technical and sporting prowess which the FA brings to its application." The Labour

leader Tony Blair described Uefa's solidarity with the Germans as "a cosy little stitch-up". Lemnart Johansson, the Ufa president, said that the FA should have been aware that Uefa was recommending Germany's bid. "They say they didn't know anything, but if that's the case there must have been a terrible breakdown in communications," he said.

However, Sir Bert Millichip, the former FA chairman and another observer in Lisbon, was adamant that "no decision was ever minuted".

A Uefa delegation will be sent to London this week to "clarify the situation. What the FA would like clarified, said David Davies, its director of public affairs, was when and where approval of the German bid was officially given. "Such a decision would have been an important matter," he said.

"We believe democracy matters. Two years ago it's entirely true there was just one European bid, but now we have a bid and there may also be others."

"This is a decision that doesn't have to be made until 2000, so why is one bid not being properly heard?"

"We will be very interested in hearing the answer to this question from the Uefa representatives. But this is a decision for Fifa."

Political footballs, Glenn Moore, Sports Section, page 7

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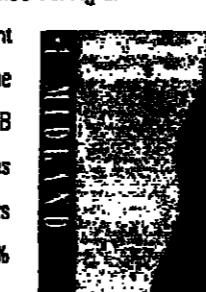
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the campaign to end youth homelessness



Will you act today to help end youth homelessness?

6 news

It was just a delivery job. Now the lorry driver faces years in jail without a trial

Jojo Moyes

James Dorner left home last December to drive to Greece, as he had on numerous occasions. With him, and his consignment of Dr Martens boots, was his girlfriend, Jacqui. She liked to go with him to make sure he ate properly and to keep him company.

The took their cab, which they had bought with help from Jacqui's elderly mother when she remortgaged her house. The trucking provided an income for all of them, and covered the mortgage payments. See you before Christmas, he told his daughter, before they left.

Now, six weeks later, James Dorner, 46, and Jacqui Rose, 50, are languishing in separate prisons in Greece, accused of what the Greek authorities have classified as "grand theft". They are unlikely to receive a trial date before September. The truck is in Athens, impounded by the Greek authorities.

Back in Hackney, north London, Cheryl, Mr Dorner's 23-year-old daughter, is trying to work out how to tell Jacqui's elderly mother that, in the absence of any income, she may well lose the house where she has lived since she was 20.

"Dad was going to pick the trailer up from Dover and dri-



Anxious times: At home in London, Cheryl worries about her father, James Dorner (right), and Jacqui. Photograph: Edward Sykes

both are distraught. "The last time he saw Jacqui she had dirt on her face and was handcuffed and being led off. He hasn't been able to change his clothes. All their stuff is in the

lorry, which has been impounded," she said.

"He's just cracking up. He's worried about Jacqui. He's not eating properly. It's difficult to cope with that sort of thing

when you're their age," she added.

Mr Dorner and Ms Rose say they are innocent. They believe the consignment must have been stolen from Dover, before

they picked it up. Their representative in Britain, Stephen Jakobi of Fair Trials Abroad, wonders why someone would attempt to deliver a load they had allegedly stolen.

He says there would be a simple way of checking whether they had "offloaded" some on the way the lorry would have stopped at weigh stations along their European route. However, collection of evidence between EU countries could take years. "The problem is not a straightforward one because of the need for international evidence as to the possibility of the goods having been missing at an earlier stage," Mr Jakobi said.

"Work will presumably have to be done in Greece, Italy, France and England and they will need separate requests to separate ministries of justice via the Greek Ministry of Justice. Our record for this kind of thing is two and a half years."

Official requests from courts



it awaiting replies from Spanish authorities to a request from the French court for assistance in the investigation.

A spokesman for the British Embassy in Athens, which is monitoring the couple, said the case was an unusual one. She said that the lawyer for Ms Rose, who was originally charged with complicity, was going to make an application for her to be released on bail, but it was unlikely that she would be returning to Britain.

"As well as finding the money, the problem is whether she would be allowed to leave the country, and if not, how she would support herself and the trial," she said.

Last year the Home Office handled 2,540 requests for evidence from countries within the EU, and 3,707 worldwide. A spokesman said that while some could take a couple of weeks to process, others could take many months.

Bouncers 'beat up' Boy George



Boy George yesterday said he was beaten up by bouncers at the nightclub where he works as a DJ.

The former Culture Club pop star says he will never again work for the Ministry of Sound one of London's leading dance venues. He was due to begin work on an album, *Dance Nation 3*, for the club yesterday, but said the session, or any other, will never take place after the alleged attack at the south-east London nightclub.

Trouble flared when Boy George used his VIP pass to allow him to bypass the queue waiting to go inside the club for an Elvis Presley theme night.

He said two doormen refused to let his female companion, called Amanda, accompany him inside.

"I said 'What's this, Islam? - we're special guests' and they grabbed me by the throat and dragged me out into the street. They kicked me and punched me and broke my fingernails. They actually beat me up under the poster advertising an album I have done for them."

"As far as I'm concerned my relationship with the Ministry of Sound is now over. We're through."

Mark Rodel, managing director of the Ministry of Sound, later confirmed an incident involving Boy George had taken place. Mr Rodel added that the doormen would all have recognised Boy George and known he worked at the club.

Boy George along with the Radio 1 DJ Pete Tong, both regulars at the club, recently produced one of the biggest-ever selling dance albums on behalf of the Ministry. *The Annual 2* sold over 450,000 copies.

DAILY POEM

A Complaint From Inner Chambers

By John Cayley, from the Chinese of Jiang Zong (AD 519-594)

Hushed and still, a hospice
on the great north road,
Threading flakes of falling snow
before a silken light.
Over the pond, the birds in pairs
are never alone,
In curtain folds, the scent of "Passion"
curling sensuously.
An animate wind brushes the screen
to bar the bright moon,
The pitiless lamp stays lit to shine
on her sleeping alone ...

*In Laozi, you said, the rivers froze
and spring was brief.
Later geese came south, but still no word from you,
on their long journey.
I wish you too would cross the passes,
come back soon
To me. My beauty, like the flower of peach and plum
falling petals of time.*

This poem comes from John Cayley's new collection of translations from the Chinese and original work, *Ink Bamboo*, jointly published, price £8.95, by Agenda Editions (5 Cranbourne Court, Albert Bridge Road, London SW11 4PE) and Bellw Publishing (8 Balham Hill, London SW12 9EA).

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It's time to end

youth homelessness

Waiting replies from Spain
authorities to a request for information in the investigation. A spokesman for the Greek Embassy in Athens, which was monitoring the couple, said it was an unusual one since that the lawyer for Ms. Agutter, who was originally fined with contempt, was to make an application to be released. On being asked if it was likely that she would return to Britain, as well as resolve the non-be problem, he whether she'd be allowed to leave the city, and if not, how she'd support herself while there.

In year the Home Office had 2,540 requests for leave from countries outside the EU and 3,500 from inside. A woman said this was one more than a couple hundred others received.

'beat George'

Jenny Agutter
Toby Anstis
Jane Asher
Carol Barnes
Lynda Bellingham
Floella Benjamin
Roger Black
Jean Boht
Jo Brand
Richard Briers
Bill Buckley
Geoff Capes
Nigel Clark
Steve Cram
Sharron Davies
John Ellis,
(Scotrail)
Alex Ferguson
Jerome Flynn
Anna Ford
Derek Fowlds
Paul Gambaccini
Glen Hoddle
Patricia Hodge
Bob Holness
Jane Horrocks
John Humphrys
Lisa I'Anson
Diane Keen
Lorraine Kelly
Matthew Kelly
Mark Lamarr
Mike Leigh
Chris Lewis
Clive Mantle
Miriam Margolyes
John McCardle
Ian McKellen
Lawrie McMenemy
Cliff Morgan
John Motson
Bill Oddie
Gary Olsen
Bill Owen

Susan Penhaligon
Trevor Phillips
Harold Pinter
Alan Plater
Robert Powell
Mark Radcliffe
Angharad Rees
Nick Revell
Angela Rippon
Chris Robertson
Tom Robinson
James Rosenhead
Andrew Sachs
John Scales
Richard Stilgoe
Robert Swerdlow
Chris Tarrant
Graham Taylor
Gwen Taylor
Christopher Timothy
Sandi Toksvig
Bill Treacher
David Vine
Julie Walters
Julia Watson
Louise Wener
Kevin Whately
Richard Wilson
Barbara Windsor
Victoria Wood
Victor Adebowale,
(Centrepoint)
Susanna Cheal,
(Who Cares Trust)
Jim Coulter,
(National Housing
Federation)
Michael Feeney,
(Westminster
Catholic Diocese)
Jon Fitzmaurice,
(CHAR)
Anne Forbes,
(Catholic Agency
for Social Concern)
Mary Gandy,
(Catholic Child
Welfare Council)
Chris Holmes,
(Shelter)
Louis Julianne,
(Fed of Black
Housing Orgs)
Paul Roberts,
(First Key)
David Warner,
(Homeless Network)

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John Burrow CBE
Chief Constable
John W Gifford
Chief Constable
David John Mellish
Chief Constable
M O'Byrne
Commissioner
Dinsdale L Pender
Chief Constable
D J Shattock
Chief Constable
BDD Shaw QPM
Chief Constable
Paul Whitehouse QPM
Chris Ball (MSF)
Rodney Bickerstaff,
(UNISON)
Ken Cameron (FBU)
Roger Lyons (MSF)
Margaret Moran,
(Local Government
Association)
Stephen Twigg,
(Fabian Society)
Diane Abbott MP
David Alton MP
Alan Beith MP

Joe Benton MP
David Blunkett MP
Paul Boateng MP
Alex Carlisle QC MP
Cynog Dafis MP
Baroness David
Bryan Davies MP
Jim Dowd MP
Bill Etherington MP
Paul Flynn MP
Maria Fyfe MP
Neil Gerrard MP
Llin Golding MP
Baroness Gould
Pauline Green MEP
Harry Greenway MP
Baroness Hilton
Dr Kim Howells MP
Doug Hoyle MP
Adam Ingram MP
Sir Russell Johnston MP
Lynne Jones MP
Nigel Jones MP
Peter Kilfoyle MP
Glenys Kinnock MEP
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the campaign to end
youth homelessness

Welsh anger ignites at 'dirty' power plant

Roger Dobson

The Government has been asked to intervene in plans to import and burn what has been described as the world's dirtiest fuel in a Welsh power station.

The Countryside Council for Wales, the Government's statutory adviser on conservation in the principality, has written to the Department of Trade and Industry urging a public inquiry into the proposals to convert Pembroke Power Station to burn Orimulsion. The move

comes after two years of investigations into the plans to burn up to five million tonnes a year of the South American bituminous fuel, described by some environmentalists as "the fuel from hell".

Under the original plans put forward by National Power, the Orimulsion would be imported through Milford Haven, the area hit by the disaster caused when the *Sea Empress* ran aground and spilled its cargo of oil. That incident highlighted the sensitivity of an area which

boasts four special conservation and protection areas and where wildlife gems alone include 10 per cent of the world's population of gannets and half the European breeding population of the Manx Shearwater.

Environmentalists maintain that the emulsion fuel from Venezuela is even more difficult to clear up than crude oil when it is spilled and that is poses an unacceptable risk. It is also claimed that so-called "gender-bender" chemicals used to help emulsify the bitumen min-

the effects of oestrogen, which in experiments have made male fish produce female protein. Friends of the Earth says that the planned Orimulsion imports would bring in 10,000 tonnes a year of these chemicals.

In a statement yesterday, the Countryside Commission said it had spent two years in discussions with the developer and the regulatory authorities, and had sought improvements in pollution control, and assurances and guarantees against the en-

vironmental consequences of accidents.

"During this period, the *Sea Empress* disaster occurred,

throwing considerable doubt

on the assurances that had

been given over marine safety

and reinforcing scientists' opinion

over the risk to the marine environment in the area," said the statement.

The CCW said it had been asked to comment on draft conditions attached to the proposal to burn the fuel and Dr Malcolm Smith, CCW's Director

of Policy and Science, said: "Our most significant single concern – the effects of a spill of emulsified oil products – cannot be resolved by such conditions."

"The issue is whether the risks and consequences of an environmental catastrophe can be understood and controlled to the point where they are acceptable in view of the outstanding importance and fragility of the marine environment in this area, and its extremely high recreation and

tourism interests. It seems unlikely that these issues can be fully explored and resolved by further discussions with the developer, and the CCW considers that the only way in which these issues can be fully aired and properly resolved is through a public inquiry."

Environmental groups have consistently opposed the plans to burn Orimulsion. Margaret Minchinick, director of Sustainable Wales, said: "The plans involve transporting this fuel from Venezuela, with the risks

of spillages, and then burning it in a power station which will result in a significant increase in particle release into the environment and worsening the acid rain problem in Wales."

The National Rivers Authority warned in a report five years ago that it would be no more difficult to contain an Orimulsion spill than one involving oil.

Because the fuel is already mixed with water, it would disperse rapidly rather than lying on the top like oil...

Young artists open door on a living hell

Clare Garner

The writing is on the wall. Life at home is hell. It's evil. Enter any room at the Behind Closed Doors art exhibition in south London, and enter the mind of a young child and a reflection of the world in which they live. It quickly becomes painfully apparent that these child artists need help. They urgently need a safe haven and time out from life as it is lived in one of the country's most deprived inner-city areas.

"Help me", screams the black lettering in a painting by John, 14. A poem by Joe, aged nine, pleads: "Violence will not solve anything. Why don't you stop whipping? ... Stop, stop, stop! It's ENOUGH."

Fortunately, help is at hand for these unhappy, disturbed children. It comes in the shape of Camila Batmanghelidjh, a half-Iranian, half-Belgian 33-year-old clinical psychotherapist whose first project, *The Place To Be*, was described by the psychotherapist and author Sue Orbach as a "model project".

Ms Batmanghelidjh's charity, Kids Company, comprises a team of 90 volunteer and paid counsellors, therapists, artists, musicians and sports enthusiasts who have spent the past year going into schools to provide emotional support for children.

Now she is putting down roots so that, as well as going out to the children, the children can come to her. Later this month, she opens her own Young People's Centre. Situated in a notoriously poor area of south



Torture chamber: John, 14, with his work at the Behind Closed Doors exhibition in south London

London, the centre, near Elephant and Castle, will be in the warehouse now housing the exhibition. It will provide an open house to young people in need of a safe environment outside school hours.

"These are children invisible to most services – they need help but have not received it," said Ms Batmanghelidjh, whose clients are sometimes as young as five and include a notorious Peckham-based gang which

calls itself the Knife Boys. "These are children who have very little attention from adults and who cope with their difficulties on their own. Many of them have experienced violence, bereavement, abuse or neglect from a young age. By offering warmth and consistency we give them new ways of coping emotionally."

The centre is easily accessible. Children don't have to rely on parents – the bulk of whom

have mental problems themselves – to attend appointments or receive help. They can refer themselves or be referred by teachers. They will be able to pursue creative interest, including art, dance, drama, music, cookery and jewellery making, as well as receive counselling.

"Many of the youngsters lack a positive, nurturing environment," said Ms Batmanghelidjh. "Many, by their own admission, would normally be roaming the streets, fighting or even committing petty crimes. The centre will be a place where children's talents can be developed and encouraged, and their worries can be heard and understood. These simple things can rekindle a child's hope."

Kids Company is extremely cost effective and, in the long-run, a "socially intelligent option," she added. "It costs kids

Company £500 a year to help a child, as opposed to the £2,500 that it costs clinics and agencies. To keep a young offender in an institution costs around £30,000 a year – yet the need for this can in some cases be avoided if a child can be reached early."

Based on research undertaken at The Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead, north-west London, Ms Batmanghelidjh claims that after about nine months a child shows marked improvements in self-esteem, attitude and behaviour.

The project now urgently needs to raise £361,000 to equip and run the centre, which it hopes will service 1,000 children a year in the evenings, at weekends and during the holidays.

■ The exhibition is at 260-261 Grosvenor Court, off Walworth Road, and runs until 30 May. To make a donation, write to: Kids Company, 40 Barforth Road, Nunhead, London SE15 3PS.

Photograph: Andrew Buurman

No end in sight to Kent prison hunger strike

Joanna Snieker

Only one of the asylum seekers being held Rochester prison was still rejecting fluids yesterday, as a fellow hunger striker narrowly escaped death after being rushed to hospital.

Meanwhile, the Prisons minister, Ann Widdecombe, cautiously welcomed an offer of help by the Bishop of Rochester but still refused to negotiate with the detainees. "I do not have a deal to offer," she told Radio 4's *Sunday Programme*. "But I would welcome anything that would assist them coming off the protest."

Fourteen inmates from Nigeria, Algeria, Romania and Zaire have been on hunger strike in the Kent prison for four weeks, claiming they are being treated like convicted criminals while their asylum applications are processed. They have pledged to continue for another two weeks.

The situation became more serious last week when six detainees started refusing water. A Nigerian pastor, Ejike Emenike, 30, was rushed into hospital to have rehydration treatment. He has now rejoined the six men in the hospital wing of the prison. A further eight are refusing food in the prison wings, according to Home Office reports. "None of them are giving cause for immediate concern," said a spokesman yesterday.

On Saturday, more than 100 protesters gathered outside the prison in support of the detainees. They marched around to the side of the prison, cheering when the detainees shouted for their freedom over the walls.

Brian Dubs, spokesman for the Rochester Hunger Strikers' Support Group and Hackney representative for Unison, the public sector union, said: "We wanted to draw as much attention to these people who are just being treated as though they are criminals. The Government seems to be taking an even harder line. They are prepared to allow them to die."

Supporters claim that many inmates have languished in jail for two years while applications are being processed, and one man is still in Rochester seven months after he signed papers for voluntary deportation.

Margaret Illin, whose husband Mircea was detained in Rochester prison for four months last year before being released, said the detainees are often treated worse than convicted criminals.

"Sometimes [after] they receive a visitor they are forced to undergo a strip search," she said. "When all the time they have not done anything wrong. These people have escaped persecution in their own country and come here where they should be safe, but then they are treated worse than criminals."

Maureen West, whose boyfriend Ben Bakshi Hamel is in the hospital wing, is anxious for information about his health. "It is starting to tell on me now," she said. "I phoned this morning and I know that he is not in hospital but I can't get any more information. I don't know much about the political side of it. But I don't think it's fair. I can't see the point in letting people die."

Detectives to question widow of 'beehive killing' suspect

Murder inquiry detectives are to fly to Australia to talk to the widow of a man who drowned before he could be questioned about the "beehive killing" of a woman teacher.

It is understood that a detective inspector and two sergeants from the Devon and Cornwall force are to question Margaret Harris, whose 62-year-old husband, Clifford, apparently committed suicide in the Swan river in Perth, Western Australia, on Wednesday.

Police believe Mr Harris, a retired teacher and bee enthusiast from Elberby in north Devon, may have been having an affair with Janice Crompton, 38, an art teacher, who lived alone in a remote former coaching house at Chelfham, near Barnstaple, north Devon.

Neighbours said he had been a regular visitor to the home of

wrapped in a duvet and polythene bags, was discovered in the back of Mr Harris's red Toyota pick-up truck which had been parked at his son-in-law's farm at Knowstone, near South Molton, north Devon.

A hive of bees was placed on top of the body.

Detectives are also to examine medical records to establish whether or not Mr Harris suffered a rheumatic problem which may have prevented him from lifting the body into the truck alone.

A police spokesman said yesterday that detectives had information that Mr Harris was fit and healthy, and that he was responsible for clearing land next to Mrs Crompton's home.

But other people had said that he was unable to lift things and required help "so certainly we will be looking at medical

records, although they may not tell us the whole story", the spokesman added.

Mr Harris's truck was parked at the farm early on Wednesday, 22 January – the day he and his wife were seen waiting for a train at Tiverton station, east Devon, en route to a planned extended holiday in Australia, where their son Philip lives in Adelaide.

A week later Mr Harris – who was being monitored by Australian police following a request via Interpol from the Devon and Cornwall force – apparently walked a mile from his hotel to drown himself.

John Evans, the Chief Constable, said he had been unable to persuade the Crown Prosecution Service to change its decision not to give permission for the Australian police to arrest Mr Harris.

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Welcome: Jacques Chirac was impressed by Boris Yeltsin's recovery
Photograph: AFPHelen Womack
Moscow

President Jacques Chirac of France yesterday said he was optimistic both about Boris Yeltsin's health and prospects for understanding between Russia and Nato.

"I was impressed by the speed of his recovery," said Mr Chirac, after three hours of talks with the Russian leader on European security issues. Mr Chirac is the first foreign leader to meet Mr Yeltsin since he fell ill with pneumonia last month.

"I found him, as always, extraordinarily well informed about all the problems of the world, which we discussed together, and very tough in the defence of Russia's in-

Public more concerned about president's fitness than Nato expansion

terests, which is entirely legitimate."

Journalists could only take his word for it, as they had no access to Mr Yeltsin himself. French television was allowed to film the Russian leader, dressed in a dark coat and fur hat, greeting Mr Chirac on the steps of his country residence at Novo-Ogaryovo. And Russian television showed a short clip of Mr Yeltsin, looking frail and with a fixed smile on his face, chatting to his guest inside. But there was no joint press conference afterwards, only Mr Chirac's briefing to reporters at Vnukovo airport as he prepared to leave Moscow.

The talks were dominated by the issue of Nato's planned eastward expansion, which Russia strongly opposes.

But Mr Chirac said he thought that if Moscow and the West showed mutual respect and flexibility, then an understanding could be reached before a summit in Madrid in July when Nato is expected to invite the first former Warsaw Pact countries to join up. "If these conditions are met, I think – and this is my personal impression – that an agreement can be reached before the Madrid summit," said Mr Chirac.

"Yeltsin is extremely satisfied with the results of the talks," said

his press spokesman, Sergei Yastrzhembsky.

Privately, Russian officials acknowledge that Nato's expansion is more or less inevitable and Moscow is looking to European countries to help it secure a deal which would at least keep the alliance's military structures away from its borders. France is seen as a friend because it understands Moscow's desire for a legally-binding document on relations with Nato, rather than a general political declaration as advocated by Washington.

But for ordinary Russians ob-

serving the meeting, the main point of interest was not Nato but whether Mr Yeltsin is fit to rule his vast country. The television footage would have done little to change the minds of political opponents who say that the Kremlin leader's double bout of pneumonia, coming on top of the heart problems that kept him out of action for much of last year, shows he should retire.

Kremlin aides insist Mr Yeltsin is making a good recovery. But he celebrated his 66th birthday on Saturday in the narrow circle of his family. The only two other guests were the Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, and the head of the

presidential administration, Anatoly Chubais, who have taken on much of the day-to-day burden of running the country while Mr Yeltsin has been ill.

■ President Yeltsin congratulated Chechnya's new leader on his election, calling the vote "an important step" in resolving Moscow's conflict with the breakaway republic, a spokesman said yesterday, AP reports.

Mr Yeltsin sent the head of his Security Council, Ivan Rybkin, to Chechnya to deliver the message at the weekend. Mr Rybkin met the Chechen president-elect, Aslan Maskhadov, who says he is determined to lead Chechnya to independence but Russia says it will never let Chechnya secede.

Burial of an African dream

Addis Ababa — "Stay with me, stay with me," beseeched Princess Mederash Worghe Abebe she threw herself on the coffin of her late husband, Crown Prince Amha Selassie. In the gloom, the Holy Trinity Cathedral was filled with chanting and incense as the remains of Emperor Haile Selassie's eldest son were lowered into the crypt to rest alongside the bodies of three of his brothers and sisters.

The service marked an emotional end to a troubled life which had latterly been lived in quiet obscurity near Washington in the United States. Crown Prince Amha Selassie, pretender to the imperial throne of Ethiopia, died in exile last month aged 80. He had not set foot in his native land since a stroke forced him to seek medical treatment in England 23 years ago.

The year after his departure, his emperor father was overthrown by the brutal Marxist Dergue regime which ruled until 1991. Since then, Ethiopia has been a democratic republic and obeisance to the old monarchy has been discouraged.

"This is a sad day," said one mourner. "Thank God Amha Selassie didn't live under the Dergue, a hand of robber thieves. The monarchy is part of our history. Please God it will one day return."

No foreign dignitaries were present at the funeral, which took place in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, yesterday. Nor had there been any announcement in the media about the ceremony. So it was a measure of the esteem in which the country's monarchy is held that so many turned up to pay their last respects to the man who, though uncrowned, was widely regarded as Emperor of Ethiopia.

Between 10,000 and 15,000 mourners

David Orr witnesses the funeral of Crown Prince Amha Selassie

thronged the cathedral. Among them were members of the royal family, many of whom had returned from exile in the US and Britain for the private funeral. In a front pew was the new claimant to the throne, Prince Zera Yacob, who lives in a Rastafarian community in Manchester. Gazing at the vaulted ceiling above the altar, Prince Yacob might have wondered at the downfall of a dynasty which traces its roots back to the Old Testament. The panels depict scenes from the life of his grandfather, the Conquering Lion of Judah, Elect of God, Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia.

Emperor Haile Selassie was put in prison by the Dergue regime and there he died in 1975. Partially paralysed, the Crown Prince and heir to the throne settled in London. By the time the underground Crown Council proclaimed him Emperor in 1989, the monarchy had been abolished and Amha Selassie had no dominion. He later moved to the United States which, with its large Ethiopian community, he found more conducive than Britain. "I hoped he would come back alive", said one man. "I would like to see Ethiopia continue as a constitutional monarchy like Britain. But I don't suppose I'll see the day when the monarchy is reinstated".

It was said one of the few young people, a bit like a fairy tale: a reminder of a more glorious past.

Platform for his faith: A devout Muslim, observing the fasting month of Ramadan, makes use of an empty cart to sit on at New Delhi railway station. About 11 per cent of India's population follow Islam
Photograph: Saurabh Dasap

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Major and Juppé to share their problems over lunch

John Lichfield
Paris

Of the many meetings, in friendship and enmity, between French and British leaders down the centuries, this will be one of the strangest.

Two much-abused Prime Ministers, John Major and Alain Juppé will meet for lunch in Downing Street today. Although both hope the worst is behind them, both men remain weak in public opinion and within the ranks of their own nominal supporters. And yet both hope to draw strength from being seen with the other.

For Mr Major it is a chance

to show that Labour is wrong

to say relations between Britain and its European Union partners are at an unworkably low ebb.

For Alain Juppé – a successful foreign minister who became the least popular centre-right prime minister for nearly 40 years – it is a rare opportunity to leave domestic cares behind

and appear respected and statesman-like abroad. Although the meeting has been planned since last November, it fits neatly into a tactical switch of roles between Mr Juppé and his patron and boss, President Jacques Chirac.

For long periods last year, President Chirac appeared to spend more time abroad than in France. For the five months up to December, he said barely a word on domestic issues.

This year he has already let it be known that he will take over

Mr Juppé's pole position as

salesman of the extraordinary

array of political, economic and

social reforms started since he

was elected in May 1995. This

will also make him the spearhead

of the centre-right campaign

in spring next year.

The reason for the switch is

debatable. Some commentators argue that the President has

despaired of Mr Juppé's ability

to connect with an almost psy-

chically depressed French public or to hold together the factions within their own RPR (Gaullist) party, never mind the broader centre-right coalition. And yet Mr Chirac is unwilling to sack him, because the alternative candidates for prime minister are either too appealing (and therefore outside his control).

Others argue that Mr Chirac

has seen signs of a brightening

horizon – unemployment down

slightly, business confidence

up, growth lifting on the back

of strong French exports. He

wants to move into the domestic

front-row in time to take the credit. Either way, Mr Chirac

cannot resist an election or a political scrap. It was unlikely

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Lack of incentives sparks show of apathy for Pakistan poll

Ian McGirk
Lahore

Pakistani voters will choose a Prime Minister today after a sluggish campaign most notable for its belaboured cricket metaphors, mudslinging, and promises to eliminate the corruption which has practically bankrupted the nation's economy.

The man tipped to win is the former Prime Minister, Mian Mohammad Nawaz Sharif, 47, who is likely to need a coalition in order to

set up a government. Analysts predict that the turnout will be poor, since voters will not have the usual financial incentives under new regulations.

At rallies for Nawaz Sharif, the Pakistan Muslim League candidate, a caged lion cub would sometimes be let out and led through the crowds. His new Prime Minister will be similarly shackled by President Farooq Leghari and his ten-member Council for Defence and National Security. Policy decisions must be reviewed

by military chiefs of staff, thus formalising the army's role which has been a constant in modern Pakistan.

Benazir Bhutto, the premier ousted by Mr Leghari in November, accused the President of being a "turncoat and an opportunist who wants a docile prime minister. He would like to rig these elections and he has 20 opponents in the Presidency already hooked up to major polling stations." From her Larkana stronghold, the Pakistan People's Party leader asserted that if today's returns

were radically different from her narrow victory in 1993, she would not accept them. She said that results in 63 of the 207 constituencies would be suspect.

Foreign observers are monitoring today's elections, but the likelihood of widespread voting fraud also worries former cricketer Imran Khan, a first timer with his untested party, *Tehreek-e-Insaf* (Movement for Justice). "It's not going to be a free and fair election," he said yesterday, admitting that he had never even cast

a vote before. "On polling day, there are physical threats from various mafias. And we have no money to transport voters to the polls."

Mr Khan set a new agenda for reform in these elections with his idealistic Islamic utopianism, modelled roughly on Malaysia. His calls for a clean-up were echoed by his main rivals, even though both have been accused of large-scale corruption. By the end of five months on the campaign trail, with only a week off for the birth of his son, Khan's speech delivery has

become forceful. "If we do get into Parliament, we will be the best opposition," Khan said. "The two other parties are declining, but whatever our result is, we have a basis for the future."

Mr Khan might link up with independent religious parties. He is acceptable to fundamentalists because of his commitment to *Sharia* law. If his *Tehreek-e-Insaf* manifesto were to be strictly followed, he says both his opponents in this election would be hanged as thieves.



Nawaz Sharif: Likely winner

Hopes rise for end to Peru hostage crisis

Phil Davison
Latin America Correspondent

Hopes for a peaceful end to the Peruvian hostage crisis rose somewhat after a weekend meeting in Toronto between Peru's President, Alberto Fujimori, and the Japanese Prime Minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto.

Mr Fujimori said preliminary talks with Tupac Amaru guerrillas occupying the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima would begin soon, with mediators from Canada, Japan, the International Red Cross and the Catholic Church. But his refusal to bow to the rebels' main demand – for the release of 400 jailed comrades – suggested the drama could drag on for weeks. And he warned that if any of the 72 hostages fell ill, he would consider storming the building. Mr Fujimori is to meet the US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, in Washington today to brief her.

After the 90-minute summit meeting in Toronto, Nestor Cerpa, the leader of the Tupac Amaru guerrillas in the residence, said deadlock continued because they were sticking to their demand for the release of prisoners, while Mr Fujimori had ruled it out.

Diplomats in Lima, however, said Mr Cerpa's tough stance may have been for public consumption while, in informal contacts with the authorities, the rebels may be prepared to settle for the release of some leading prisoners or simply bet-

Tokyo and Lima agree to talks with guerrilla group

ter prison conditions. The Tupac Amaru spokesman in Europe, Isaac Velasco, said yesterday: "We have said from the beginning that our global position is negotiable. We are not going to maintain our global proposal 100 per cent." This appeared to suggest Mr Cerpa, a former textile-union negotiator, might bargain with the government to find a way to get his

14-strong guerrilla unit out of the siege alive, to a jungle hideout or a country such as Cuba.

In interviews yesterday, Mr Fujimori said that, in the agenda for the coming talks, the rebels had agreed not to mention the demand for the release of their jailed comrades. "For us this is an advance," he said.

Saturday's Toronto meeting was the first time Mr Fujimori and Mr Hashimoto had met since the rebels stormed a diplomatic garden party on 17 December. They apparently chose Canada because its ambassador to Lima, Anthony Vincent, will be on the mediation team and so that neither would be seen to be losing face.

Mr Hashimoto had expressed concern that Mr Fujimori may be leaning towards a military solution.

The Japanese Prime Minister strongly criticised provocative police manoeuvres outside the besieged compound last week, when police tanks led the rebels to fire at an armoured police vehicle.

In Toronto, Mr Fujimori admitted the police actions had been "inappropriate."

But he added: "To the extent that there is no harm to the hostages, no force will be used. But if a single hostage, or several hostages are taken ill, that would not satisfy the conditions I have set."

With the siege about to move into its eighth week, the chances of hostages falling sick are growing rapidly.

Mastermind: The guerrilla chief, Nestor Cerpa, during an interview in his residence

Japanese PM wriggles on horns of a dilemma

Richard Lloyd Parry

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The hostage crisis in Peru has been complicated immeasurably by the unique relationship between Lima and Tokyo, and the domestic agenda of the Prime Minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto. At the emergency summit in Toronto at the weekend he "reaffirmed his full confidence" in Peru's handling of the situation, a curiosity since last week he was telling his own people the opposite. What was clear, and ever was the Tupac Amaru's cunning in choosing the residence of the Japanese ambassador for the drama.

To Peru, Japan is more than just a rich trading partner: it is its biggest foreign benefactor, and the ancestral home of tens of thousands of its people, up to and including its president.

More than 96bn yen (2500m) of development loans are tied up in Peru.

More importantly, from the Tupac Amaru's point of view, Japan has a poor record of cri-

sis management, a squeamishness about the sufferings of its citizens abroad and a history of caving in to terrorism. Of all Peru's friends, Japan was always going to be least tolerant of a hard line and with most leverage to apply, in terms of supplementing its aid packages or withdrawing them. "Fujimori certainly knows that if he decides to pull a Rambo against Tokyo's wishes, the money pipeline from Japan will be shut down instantly," said John Neuffer, senior research fellow at MITI's Marine Research.

Apart from the ambassador, the 72 hostages include employees of some of Japan's biggest corporations. During his 12 months in power Mr Hashimoto has created an image as a dynamic leader, in contrast with his predecessor, who was paralysed by a number of disasters in 1995, including the Kobe earthquake and Tokyo subway gas attack.

Last year Mr Hashimoto supervised talks with the US on reducing bases on Okinawa and since his re-election in October he has presented himself as the aggressive champion of administrative and financial reform. But in the hostage crisis he is almost helpless.

Japan has no special forces to aid citizens overseas; in any case, its "peace" constitution makes dispatch of troops overseas a political minefield. Mr Hashimoto is in danger of appearing more and more like a bit-player. It was this impression that the summit in Toronto was intended to dispel.

Technically, Mr Hashimoto could have the final say: the ambassador's residence counts as Japanese territory and should a direct assault become the only option (if any harm befell the hostages, for instance), he would be asked for his consent.

If he said no, he would appear culpably weak-kneed; if he said yes, he would have to face the consequences of a shoot-out. However tough his public image, it is a choice which would bring nothing but risk.



Real life: *Beauty with Candle* by Chen Yifei, the painter who is finally finding favour in his home land Courtesy: Marlborough Fine Arts (London) Ltd

Teresa Poole
Peking

It could have been a tricky manoeuvre. But with utmost skill and without a word, China's most successful modern painter guided one of the country's ageing deputy prime ministers past the larger-than-life, full-frontal female attractions of *Reclining Nude* towards the safer territory of his portrait of a fully clothed *Young Cellist*.

As the posse of black-raincoated public-security officials roughly elbowed out of the way anyone conceivably near the path of the 70-year-old government official, a senior representative from the organising British gallery asked the henchmen whether it might be appropriate to offer the VIP a glass of wine. "He does not drink," barked back the bodyguard, shoving her to one side.

Such are the challenges of bringing an art show to Peking. But at least the London gallery, Marlborough Fine Art, had been forewarned of the ban on nails for hanging paintings at the exhibition venue, the China National Museum of Fine Arts. Yards of golden chain had instead been brought to secure the huge oil canvases and smaller drawings for "The Homecoming of Chen Yifei", a retrospective of the contemporary mainland painter whose "romantic realism" paintings

China welcomes home prodigal artist son

have pioneered a new commercial status for modern Chinese art.

Last October, for instance, *Love Song*, which portrays a Chinese couple playing musical instruments, sold at auction in Peking for 1.96m yuan (£150,000). Four of his recent Tibetan series have also sold in recent months, making a total of around £450,000.

For 50-year-old Chen Yifei, the current show is his first in China since he departed for the United States in 1980. It opened just before Christmas in Shanghai, his home town, where Chen was besieged by adoring fans delighted that a local artist had achieved such international commercial acclaim.

This weekend the exhibition transferred to Peking, where the VIP guest-list indicated more than a passing interest from government leaders. As well as the 70-year-old vice-Prime Minister, Zou Jiahua, the official opening was attended by Li Ruihuan, a standing-committee member of the Politburo no less.

It was not always thus. Chen graduated from art college in Shanghai just as the Cultural Revolution started. It was a mixed time for the young artist. His technical skills and draughtsmanship were employed churning out socialist realist propaganda art, punctuated by periods of criticism for lack of revolutionary ardour. His heroic portrait of a Chinese soldier,

Eulogy of the Yellow River, was attacked for using colours which were "too soft". Chen said: "At that time all the paintings should be 'red' and 'bright'." The most serious trouble was over *Red Flag* whose realistic depiction of soldiers in battle was attacked for "propagating the horrors of war".

By the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chen's parents – persecuted as both intellectuals and Christians – had died. In his career, however, his technical skills had triumphed over political criticism and he emerged as one of China's most important modern artists.

"Fate", as he puts it, led to an opportunity to move to the US in 1980, where he was taken up by Armand Hammer's gallery and launched down the artistic path towards riches.

Financial wellbeing has come easier than critical acclaim for his near-photographic style of painting. "I worked as a picture restorer for one year when I arrived in the US," he said. "So I wanted to try to use the Western, very traditional painting techniques." The most recent works, giant canvases of Tibetan people, have become more impressionistic, but Chen still bristles at the "political reasons" why Western critics prefer abstract or avant-garde art as an expression of new freedoms in China.

While Chen may gripe at critics, his financial success looks assured. Marlborough Fine Art intends to exhibit him at several international art fairs this year, and will hold a London show with his work in June. According to Chen, his parents wanted him to follow in his father's footsteps as a chemical engineer because "artists were always poor".

مکالمہ من آندر سل

international

Icy grip of fear returns to haunt Albanian streets

Brutal crackdown brings night raids and torture

Andrew Gumbel
Berat

Albanian authorities have rounded up, arrested and beaten hundreds of young men all over the country, sending some for "special treatment" in the capital, Tirana, and herding the rest into local police stations in a ruthless attempt to scare the restive population off the streets.

In the southern town of Berat and in other provincial towns in the area, the atmosphere is icy with fear. Not only will ordinary people not speak, they will not even sit at the same table as visiting journalists. The towns are crawling with police and with sinister men with short

cropped hair and leather jackets who stare at everyone who passes. Only the bravest describe how the police, some of whom are masked, set up roadblocks and swoop on homes at three in the morning.

The repression in progress is by far the most brutal in Albania since the dying days of the Communist regime in 1990. According to the government's own figures, 247 people have been arrested with the charge that they were responsible for the destruction of state property in last Sunday's riots, and 72 committed to trial. In repeated bulletins, state television has announced that the proof against this hard core is overwhelming

and they can expect to serve up to 15 years in prison.

The extent of the repression appears to be much wider than officially acknowledged. *The Independent* has seen detailed evidence of more than 200 people having been rounded up in Berat alone. Of these, 46 have been sent to Tirana, 30 have been released and 130 or more have been crammed into two tiny rooms in the police station.

Those released have all been treated for beatings, and have reported appalling violence and torture. The doctors involved are so terrified that their official diagnoses include such surreal conditions as "axial neurosis" and "toxic influenza". In

private, the same doctors say some of the released detainees are too roughed up to move. Unconfirmed reports also suggest that the latest prisoners, too numerous for the police station, are being held in sewers and underground military tun-

nels. The fate of those sent to Tirana is unknown.

With the crisis over Albania's failed pyramid investment schemes entering its final, most devastating phase, the government is clearly terrified of a re-

peal of the riots that pushed the country to the brink of chaos a week ago, and bewildered about how to prepare its people for the next round of bad news.

This week, the state is supposed to begin compensating people with assets frozen from

two of the pyramid schemes, but it is not clear that it will be able to do so. The largest of the schemes still in operation, involving hundreds of thousands of investors and hundreds of millions of dollars, are just a step away from collapse. Their disappearance would almost certainly bring the government crashing down with them.

Besides the Albanian town worst-hit by the wave of arrests, partly because it saw some of the worst violence last weekend and partly because it is a traditional Socialist Party stronghold that bitterly resents the looming presence of the ruling Democratic Party, which has taken power locally through a mix of intimidation and electoral fraud.

The arrests appear to be targeted at anyone who might try to stir up trouble. Relatives' attempts to locate detainees have proved fruitless.

The government is due to begin pay-outs on Wednesday, but it is not clear if these will be in cash or in some kind of bond or voucher. Either way, a major issue of currency risks triggering hyperinflation. The lek has already nose-dived against the dollar in the past few days.

The authorities are praying that the biggest scheme, run by the conglomerate Vef, can keep going since the company is the Albanian equivalent of General Motors - if it blows, the whole country blows. But Vef has defaulted on its investment contracts, withholding customers' capital, paying interest in lek even on hard-currency deposits (at a terrible exchange rate), and cutting its interest rate in half.



Taken in: The opposition trade union leader, Azam Hajdari (centre), being arrested by police in Tirana yesterday

Photograph: Michel Euler/AP



PHOTOGRAPH MAX FORSYTHE

Jail grenade fuels biker-gang feud

Copenhagen (AP) — An anti-tank grenade was fired into a prison housing members of the Bandidos biker gang early yesterday, injuring one gang member in his cell.

Police said the grenade, fired from a nearby highway, apparently did not explode after breaking through the cell window.

Identified as Paul Andersen, who is being held pending trial in connection with the October anti-tank grenade attack on the Hell's Angels' compound in Copenhagen, Denmark, in which two people were killed and 19 injured.

Police said several people with ties to the Hell's Angels were arrested in connection with yesterday's 4 am attack on the jail in Koegge, 12 miles south of Copenhagen. They did not give further details.

The Hell's Angels and Ban-

didos gangs have been fighting for three years in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The gang war has left 10 people dead and more than 50 injured. Attacks have become increasingly brazen in the past year, beginning with shooting in March at the international airports in Copenhagen and Oslo, Norway, in which one Bandido member was killed and four were injured.

Yesterday's attack was the first time in the feud that an anti-tank grenade was used against the Bandidos. At least nine grenades have been launched against the Hell's Angels or their allies.

Police said the grenade fired yesterday was of unspecified Eastern European origin. Officials have said that grenades used in previous attacks were believed to have been stolen from lightly guarded military depots in Sweden.

significant shorts

Armed gang kills 31 in Algerian massacre

A band of men armed with knives and axes killed 31 people in an Algerian town south of the capital Algiers, the newspaper *El Watan* reported.

Some 50 men led the attack just after midnight on Friday, invading a neighbourhood in Medea, and forcing residents into the street where they were killed and then beheaded by a dwarf, the paper quoted residents as saying. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the massacre, but suspicion fell on Muslim militants. A source close to security forces said they believed the 31 were related to a dissident member of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).

About 310 people are known to have been killed, and some 600 injured, in attacks since the start of the Muslim festival of Ramadan on 10 January.

AP/Reuters - Algiers/Paris

Bulgaria protests hit the road

Protesters blocked main roads in Bulgaria as leaders of the ruling Socialist Party met to try to form a new government, ignoring four weeks of daily opposition rallies and calls for immediate elections. Bulgaria is edging towards economic collapse and urgently needs a credible government to negotiate with foreign lenders and set up a fixed exchange rate regime to restore confidence in the national currency.

Reuters - Sofia

Bombs explode over Corsica

More than 50 bombs exploded early yesterday all around Corsica in a wave of violence unprecedented in recent years. The Corsican National Liberation Front-Historic Branch claimed responsibility for the 56 pre-dawn attacks in a three-page communiqué sent to local media. No one was hurt in the bombings which targeted banks and government buildings. Police later detained three people for questioning, saying that the three were close to the Confindustria Nazionale, the legal arm of the Liberation Front-Historic Branch. The bombings came after France cracked down last week on the separatist movement.

AP - Ajaccio

Israel-Palestine 'hope'

Israeli and Palestinian leaders, in what they called positive and productive talks, agreed at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos to meet again on Thursday for detailed talks on extending Palestinian self-rule.

The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said the agreement reflected "a great feeling of hope" and that he was confident that he and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat could overcome the obstacles to Middle East peace.

Reuters - Davos

We'll go on listening even when you can't go on talking.

Every year at The Samaritans we receive over a million totally silent phone calls. For whatever reason, the callers can't begin to tell us what's troubling them.

Equally, callers who do start may be unable to go on - many hang up halfway through a conversation, or simply go quiet.

With all of these callers, though, we have one golden rule: we never stop listening. We won't be the ones to hang up or say goodbye.

Our number's in the phone book, or you can call our new national number on 0345 90 90 90. Every call is confidential. Even if you can't talk we'll listen.

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هذا من الأصل

Uniforms, yes: but the issue is standards

That David Blunkett was on the television yesterday morning, but it was so early – what was he talking about again? Children to salute the Union flag on their way in to school? Homework to be doubled? The Lord's Prayer, *God Save the Queen* and the new Clause IV to become part of the national curriculum? No, no, it was school uniform: luminous blazers to make it easier for conscientious citizens to detect curve-breakers who are not doing their homework.

With our liberal leanings, it would be easy to oppose school uniform. Few of us liked it when we were at school. But Mr Blunkett is, we have to admit with some regret, utterly right. Training shoes with flashing lights in the heels present too strong an argument.

It is, essentially, the “flashing trainers” argument which has swung the pendulum back from the liberalism of the Seventies.

The wishiest of washy liberals is now in favour of school uniform because they are opposed to fashion one-up-personship, just as they are opposed to all competitive sports. It is not fair on children from poor families to allow them to be visibly outdone in designer labels or expensive Reeboks. As soon as they are old enough to want Umbro and Nike

(usually when they cease to be Infants and become Juniors), put them in uniform.

Mr Blunkett reflects the shift in mood. He was leader of Sheffield council in 1981 when it decided its schools could not make the wearing of uniforms compulsory. But as his sons advanced through the comprehensive education system, the more authoritarian and puritanical side of his personality came to the fore. As a parent, he voted to bring back uniforms in his son's school in Sheffield. And yesterday he said a Labour government would encourage parents to be balloted on compulsory uniforms in all state primary and secondary schools.

Hillary Clinton has made the same ideological journey in America, where uniforms are rare. Most American schools simply have dress codes – “no knives to be worn outside the pants”, that kind of thing – but she told the Democratic Convention last year that she wanted school uniforms back.

There is one other good argument in favour of school uniforms: it is that pupils are more recognisable outside schools, which acts as a disincentive to truancy, and makes it easier for teachers to tend their charges.

For the rest, arguments for and against are either trivial, or bad. A

delightfully attractive but not at all compelling reason for having uniform is that it gives pupils something relatively harmless to rebel against. Instead of breaking up phone boxes or cutting up bus seats, they can focus their energies on how to tie the biggest knot with the shortest wide bit, or how they can make their skirts shorter by hitching up the waistband.

Poor arguments are mostly separated. Getting rid of school uniforms, the blimpish right argues, symbolised the arrival of permissiveness: casual clothes in school blurred the distinction between

teacher and pupil, learning and sloth, order and anarchy. Beyond the marginal effect on pupils in signalling that school is different from the rest of life, none of this stands up to scrutiny. But the Tory press will now co-opt Mr Blunkett for the most archaic forms of dress, in their nostalgic reverie of blazers and ties, gymshirts and tunics. And the full Buffon Tufton Memorial Kit probably costs far more than any Blue Bolt, Calvin Klein or Fila. In practice, most schools strike a sensible balance between cost, practicality and smartness. Ties, for example, are not necessary.

The trouble with the wishy-washies is that they tend to go for a pick 'n' mix approach to uniforms. They tend to go for “soft” uniforms, with many of the elements optional, or even just a tightened up dress code. That defeats the point, which is, to state the obvious, uniformity. Whatever is agreed should be narrowly defined and sensibly but firmly enforced.

That is our opinion, it is Gillian Shephard's and now it is David Blunkett's too. But the important point is that no government should dictate these things. It should be up to parents and staff, and in some degree pupils, to decide. Giving pupils a say is a good way of encouraging responsibility; a uniform imposed by consent after debate is much likelier to be respected.

Of course, dress codes and school uniforms, like flags and prayer in the United States, are essentially peripheral matters, used for their symbolism by politicians of all stripes because the real issues that matter in education are much harder to tackle. Pupils wearing uniforms don't make for better teachers, nor do they instantly become cleverer: they just create a better climate for organising learning. So this is just a Monday morning before the election gets properly under way leading article: the serious debate should be about

whether Chris Woodhead is correct to claim that 15,000 teachers are not up to scratch. Last week it emerged that his own inspectors had only found 4,500 substandard ones, and he responded by saying his staff were just being too lax in their judgments. Let's not forget that all this fuss about school uniforms, which is after all designed to gratify the *Daily Mail* and its readers more than *The Independent* and its leader writers, is merely incidental in the crusade to raise standards.

A plug for the sea breeze

Are you a Luddite Don Quixote, tilting at wind turbines spreading their visual pollution across Wales and the Lake District? Or a technogeek like Jonathan Porritt, who thinks that wind farms are beautiful, as well as being the alternative to planet-warming fuel-burning? On balance, we're with Mr Porritt, although we know that they're noisy and don't want too many more of them on our hills. Surely the answer is, as we reported last year, to float them at sea. And to tax fossil fuels into the ground, where they belong.



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Saddam still flouting UN demands

Sir: Dr al-Rubeai and Mr Rangwala (letters, 28 January) argue that sanctions help Saddam. I strongly disagree. May I add to Mr Berman's points (letter, 25 January)?

We should not forget why UN sanctions were imposed in 1990. Iraq had to be made to atone for its illegal occupation of Kuwait and to compensate the victims of the Gulf War. It had to be made clear to Saddam that aggression does not pay. Sanctions were the means of forcing Iraq to meet its obligations under Security Council Resolutions.

Iraq has not complied. On the contrary, Saddam continues to conceal his residual weapons of mass destruction capability. He has provided no compensation to war victims, including many Britons. He has returned no Kuwaiti property. He has accounted for none of the over 600 missing Kuwaiti and third country nationals.

Mr Rangwala defends Iraq's right to possess weapons. The UN Security Council does not demand the destruction of Iraq's conventional weapons; it does demand – rightly – that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction be destroyed.

Before the Gulf war Iraq possessed enough chemical and biological weapons to destroy the world's population several times over. Saddam's plans to procure and produce such lethal weapons pose a severe risk to the security of the region. They must be foiled for good. Until they are, sanctions must stay. The UN Security Council is unanimous on this.

Saddam's failure to meet the UN's demands prolongs the Iraqi people's suffering. He oppresses his people ruthlessly, with a sickening disregard for human rights. He spends Iraq's scarce reserves on military procurement and lavish palaces for his own use.

The UK has been active in helping to alleviate the Iraqi people's suffering. We co-sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 986 which allows Iraq to sell oil to finance food, medicines and essential humanitarian projects. About £800m worth of aid will flow to the Iraqi people over the first six months. We have already given them over £90m in aid since 1991, making it the second largest donor.

I fear that the Iraqi people cannot expect to live anything like a normal life while Saddam remains. They would certainly be better off without him.

The Rt Hon JEREMY HANLEY MP
Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
Foreign & Commonwealth Office
London SW1

Taxi is cheaper, Ministers

Sir: Travelling to lunch with John Major by private car and getting home would cost Peter Lilley, Michael Heseltine, Gillian Shephard and Sir George Young a total of £168 (at 0.33p per mile), with 11 hours' driving time. (assuming there were no hold-ups) and produce about 120 kilograms of CO₂ (lunch date with Mr Major could be a journey too far), 30 January).

If instead they used four large



high-quality taxis, each sharing them with two other occupants making similar journeys, this would save them £33 and they would only be responsible for 40kg of CO₂. The journeys might take a bit longer while other people were picked up and dropped off en route but during this time they could read, work, phone etc.

What we need to develop in this country is the information infrastructure that would allow people making similar journeys to be matched together in this way and feed these matched journey requirements to the taxi companies for acute beds?

Possibly John Major's guests could discuss the method of achieving this during their lunch, researching it on the way there, and actioning it on the way home.

PETER MILLER
Community Technology Ltd
Cambridge

Sir: It's worrying that J M Murphy (letter, 1 February) evokes that old chestnut, the “taxpayer” argument, to justify misgivings over the A30 protesters.

All Swampy and colleagues did was to exercise their right in a democratic society to freedom of speech.

The sinister but logical extension of the Murphy view is that we, as taxpayers, should not support any form of protest – for example by funding the policing of marches.

Freedom of speech is used-dependent: we either use it or lose it.

If the Murphy view is upheld, it will be lost, and we'll all end up doing what we're told.

TIM CHEEK
Cambridge

Right balance for single-sex wards

Sir: As Stephen Dorrell points out, single-sex wards would indeed protect the privacy and dignity of patients (“Mixed-sex wards axed by Dorrell”, 28 January), but could the policy – with no margin for flexibility for ward managers – not cause a further rise in waiting times for acute beds?

A male patient with an acute medical or surgical complaint, having to wait for a male bed to become available on a partitioned ward with only a female bed available, could be put at risk.

JAMES TEMLETT
Hull

Irish gave up own tongue

Sir: To this native of Northern Ireland the general thrust of Canon Nicholas Prayling's call for England to face up to its guilt in Ireland (“Britain owes Ireland an apology”, 29 January) seems difficult to gainsay. However, on one detail his *mea culpa* is too stolid. England did not rob the Irish people of their language; the historical evidence suggests that they threw this beautiful and ancient tongue away.

Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847), the Liberator, a fluent Irish speaker himself, refused to teach it to his children and urged his countrymen to speak English on the grounds that this would further

their political and economic emancipation. Many followed his advice.

It is true that in the later 19th century English was the medium of instruction in the Irish national educational system and speaking Irish was harshly discouraged in schools. However, since, as you reported on 31 January, Total is in partnership with the Burmese state oil company, I considered changing to another brand in protest against human rights abuses in Burma, but have decided not to.

If, through a boycott of its products, Total were to disengage from Burma, it would have to source its oil from somewhere else. Iraq? Iran? Algeria? Almost all major producer countries are, frankly, tyrannies.

This having been said, fluency in Irish, acquired in school, is valued by many in the nationalist community in the North. As a gesture, why should the language not be given official parity with English in the Six Counties?

THE REV PETER HATTON
Droitwich, Worcestershire

Naafi with sole

Sir: “Stewed vegetables, tough pork chops and bromide tea” does not sum up Naafi food (“Forces say farewell to the Naafi”, 75 years on”, 29 January). The grilled Dover sole in the Naafi Club at Portsmouth in 1947 was superb; in the succeeding half century I have never had any quite as good.

TH K BARRON
Bristol

Best way to boycott oil?

Sir: I normally buy Total petrol. It is cheap, the local Total garage is convenient for my home, and they run a tempting “points” scheme. However, since, as you reported on 31 January, Total is in partnership with the Burmese state oil company, I considered changing to another brand in protest against human rights abuses in Burma, but have decided not to.

If, through a boycott of its products, Total were to disengage from Burma, it would have to source its oil from somewhere else. Iraq? Iran? Algeria? Almost all major producer countries are, frankly, tyrannies.

All oil comes mixed with blood – nearly all oil products come from crude that has been blended from various sources, and there is no way that I know of ensuring that the petrol from your neighbourhood pump is exclusively of North Sea or North American origin.

JAMES SCOTT
Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

Our film was fair

Sir: Your reviewer has some criticism of Ken Loach's *Carla's Song*, which I produced (Tablet, 30 January). That is his right, but there is one aspect of his piece which I find offensive. It is the suggestion that by portraying “all-singing, all-dancing” Sandinistas we impose our own foreign, patronising

view of life in Nicaragua. In the film, Carla is part of a cultural brigade, a group of dancers and musicians who tour the war zones to boost morale. Their show was devised by people who did precisely that in the Eighties. We recorded their reality and show it in the film. This is not a romanticised version of the war, it is how the Nicaraguans chose to present themselves and – judging by the reactions of the people at the many screenings there – for them it clearly has the ring of truth.

An earlier film of Ken's, *Ladybird, Ladybird*, opens with a karaoke scene in a pub. The real-life Maggie (on whom the film was based) and Chrissie Rock (the actress who played her) shared a love of karaoke. While we were in Nicaragua, Oyanya Cabezas had a family birthday – the centrepiece, in common with many Nicaraguan parties, was a highly charged dance, the *Palo de Mayo*. Both scenes echo their own reality.

SALLY HIBBIN
Producer,
Parallax Pictures Ltd
London WC2

Factory decline

Sir: Does Hamish McRae (“The other problem with jobs bought from the Japanese”, 31 January) not realise that it is precisely because manufacturing jobs are of less worth than the more highly paid “higher-skilled” positions in finance, marketing and advertising that UK manufacturing has declined to its current level? Without manufacturing what would we propose to advertise, market or finance?

PAUL ROGERS
Wells, Somerset

Food safety body needs powers

Sir: The description “a food safety chief, independent but answerable to ministers” is an oxymoron (“Cabinet concedes need for food safety supremo”, 30 January).

The actual safety of food is what we require, not the perception of safety. The question we should ask is “would such a body have prevented the BSE risks?” The answer to this is no. They might have reduced the problems after the 1988 and 1989 bans, but no more than that.

A useful body would have to have powers over animal feed and additives, such as the American FDA is using at present to ban the use of meat and bonemeal in feed.

We should cease being hypocritical about how our food is produced and how the inevitable waste is disposed of or recycled, by renderers (and compounders). Prevention of bad practices requires a sufficient food premises inspectorate (which could have prevented the *E. coli* outbreak).

The restoration and funding of veterinary research laboratories and the veterinary inspectorate, together with the encouragement of medical/veterinary and international research collaboration, are what is required to stave off further comparable diseases. We should learn from our mistakes.

ANNE C MADDOCKS,
Chairman,
Spongiform Encephalopathy
Research Campaign
Chichester, Kent

Sir: David Gordon (letter, 31 January) replies to my letter of 27 January and points out that farming systems still exist which allow animals a reasonable life and appropriate food, and which also minimise environmental damage.

However there is insufficient land available for our present number of farm animals to be reared in the ways that Mr Gordon describes. Large intensive farms are therefore a major factor in soil erosion and desertification throughout the world. For example, in the United States, 95 per cent of topsoil loss is due to livestock ranching.

We can only feed the world's human population in an environmentally sustainable way if people in the West eat more vegetarian and vegan food. Instead we waste too many valuable crops by feeding them to animals. This wastes between 75 and 90 per cent of the protein and energy value.

In 1993 the “Worldwatch Report” said that “if we in the rich industrial nations do not eat less meat, the world will starve”.

RICHARD MOUNTFORD

Birmingham

Cold comfort

Sir: I sympathise with Colin Dunn and his request for advice on how to react without giving offence when a young woman, full of cold, sniffing and sneezing, takes the adjacent seat on a long train journey (letter, 31 January).

It would be terribly rude to cause her any embarrassment, so when this happens to me I always endeavour to outdo her.

This puts her at ease. I act out symptoms of such severity that she will understand that it does not matter if I catch her cold.

Usually the young ladies are so overwhelmed by my thoughtfulness that they choose to sit elsewhere, so I can enjoy my demise in peace.

JOE BOSWELL

London N4

14 profile

New statesman or new conspirator?

There goes my peerage," said Geoffrey Robinson MP when he saw the cover of the *New Statesman* the first issue after its redesign. It sported a Steve Bell cartoon that depicted the Royal Family as a line of prostitutes on a street corner, with Lady Di leaning into the window of a kerb-crawler. Robinson, who has not long taken over as the magazine's owner, seemed genuinely taken aback by the sight.

Anyone who knows Ian Hargreaves, quondam editor of this newspaper and now in the chair at the *Statesman*, would not have been surprised. Not by the cartoon. But by the fact that he had not troubled to show it to the proprietor until it was too late to change it.

So if it is not a pacer, what exactly is it that has motivated Robinson in his decision to buy the loss-making magazine? Conventional wisdom has it that he is after a seat in the Cabinet. Such were the judgements aired over the summer when he lent Tony Blair his villa in Tuscany for a family holiday.

Robinson, a former managing director of Jaguar Cars, has built up a fortune of at least £30m on the side over the past decade while serving quietly – very quietly – as a Labour MP. He is just the man to give business credibility to a Labour minister, most likely at the Department of Trade and Industry.

But in recent weeks a more

Geoffrey Robinson is an MP, a tycoon and now a publisher. What does he want next? A Cabinet seat? Or more, asks Paul Valley

Machiavellian theory has begun to emerge – that Robinson is laying the ground for some future plot to oust Tony Blair as leader and replace him with the shadow Chancellor, Gordon Brown. Already! Surely this is too far-fetched.

"He's part of Brown's positioning in the party to build up an alternative power base to create an independent claim to the leadership should the need arise," said one who is close to the heart of new Labour. "In the Parliamentary Labour Party people are signed up as Brown or Blair supporters."

Once Brown and Blair were inseparable. Now there is an emerging tension. I wouldn't want to overstress it, but it's a potential faultline and it is get-

ting more pronounced. Certainly some of the more factional Blairites see the *New Statesman* as a Brown organ.

There is no ground so fecund for conspiracy theory as a political party – particularly one that feels itself at the portals of power.

It is true that Brown's lieutenant, Ed Balls, played a significant role in the plot to secure the *New Statesman* as an organ for new Labour. The chance came last Christmas, when the magazine's previous bankroller, Philip Jeffrey, the socialist millionaire who founded the Fads DIY chain, withdrew funding and put it into administration. Jeffrey had intended to buy it back from the administrators, Grant Thornton, on terms that would allow him greater control. But the administrators' duty to seek the highest bidder provided the grounds for a grand plot in which the key new Labour couriers – the spin doctor Peter Mandelson, the press strategist Alastair Campbell and Blair's chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, all became involved.

At its heart was Mr Balls, who became the main intermediary between the party machiavels, the magazine's staff and the man who was persuaded to stump up the asking price – £125,000, plus £250,000 to pay off its debts – Geoffrey Robinson.

There is no doubt that Robinson is a wheeler-dealer. He is a relaxed, affable character who does not come across like the

boss of a metal-bashing company, or even an old-style Labour MP. His image is more that of a star-struck celebrity lawyer.

"His manner is diffident, almost bumbling and ineffective," said one friend, "but it belies a sharp mind. He's actually very clever. He thinks quickly, reads people and situations fast and makes swift decisions."

"Things get done around him," said another. "In conversation you think he's not concentrating on what you're saying, but the next day he'll make some incisive remark about it."

That Robinson is an achiever is beyond dispute. His wealth supports a portfolio of interests worthy of a Renaissance man: business, architecture, cars, painting, football and science. Almost certainly Labour's richest MP, he owns an eight-bedroomed Lutyns home near Godalming, Surrey, where his opera singer wife, Marie Elena Giorgio, lives, as well as his own penthouse overlooking Park Lane.

Robinson collects not just cars – which include not one but two chauffeur-driven Jags – he also collects houses. He has recently acquired another 20-bedroomed Lutyns mansion with a Gertrude Jekyll garden in Hampshire and has a flat in the National Service, Robinson

Riviera and the estate in Italy. But "politics is his first love," said one acquaintance. He is known to be a key figure in Labour's New Business Committee, established to secure new business contacts for the party. Less well-known is that he is the brains behind Labour's only new fiscal strategy – the windfall tax on the public utilities. It is Robinson who has done the backroom work for Gordon Brown which has led to the extension of the tax to British Telecom and the former British Airports Authority, and the likelihood of doubling the income from the tax to £10bn.

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went to work on transport in the Labour Research Department. ill-fated Meriden Motor Cycle Workers Co-operative.

From there he went to the Industrial Reorganisation Corporation, the crucible of Wilson's "white heat of technology" revolution. But the reality of state planning proved sobering. Robinson, along with most of the IRC's other young corporatist planning whizzkids – who included Sir Alastair Morton (now of Euro-Tunnel), Graham Hearne (new Enterprise Oil boss) and John Gardner (now head of the Laird Group) – left the organisation as firm advocates of market economics. "He doesn't want to see Brown and Blair make the same mistakes," one insider said.

Out in the world of industry, Robinson became financial controller of British Leyland, then managing director of Leyland Innocenti in Milan before being made chief executive of Jaguar Cars at the age of 33. His management style was such that when he applied to be Labour candidate for Coventry North West (the constituency that contains the Jaguar and Daimler car plants) he was adopted with the backing of even the hard-line trade unionists. This was a man bringing jobs to a declining industry, who was subsequently elected to act as unpaid chief exec of the

surgeries; during one year he did not utter a single word in the Commons chamber.) They came within 1 per cent of the votes needed. Only Robinson's Jaguar background helped him to hold on, many hard-line unionists wouldn't join the Miliband attempt to oust him.

For all that, Robinson continued in his ways. During the 1992-93 parliamentary session, in a table of the Commons' 20 worst attenders he came 19th. (Fortunately, Tony Blair was 20th.)

With power in prospect he has returned to the scene, but is there any real evidence that he is backing Brown?

"Geoffrey thinks that all politics is about the economy," said one friend. "He is scornful of the moral and constitutional agendas. He hates Jack Straw and his illiberal populism. So Brown's is the area to which he naturally gravitates."

There is no doubt that he is closer to Brown than to Blair. He backed Brown for the leadership when John Smith died. Brown and Brown's brother used his flat on the Riviera for a holiday last summer, and at Robinson's frequent and lavish parties Brown is more often in evidence than is the party leader.

Greyerly, the two men do not accord completely. Robinson is strongly opposed to a European single currency. At the last Labour conference he was actively briefing people against the single currency and telling everyone that Blair was having second thoughts on Europe.

Those who really know him discount the notion that he is helping to position Brown for a future plot against Blair. Geoffrey is not a mischievous maker. At 58 he is not a factor leader or even a king-maker – he's been out of the swim too long to have the contacts. He's more of an uncle to Gordon. He knows his own limitations.

Perhaps he knows that a seat in the Cabinet is beyond him, too. Despite his manifest intelligence and management skills, there are those who maintain that he lacks the skills in argument to be a Cabinet minister.

But owning the *New Statesman* gives him a different kind of leverage. It could be that he simply thinks he can make money from the magazine, having bought it at rock bottom in the economic cycle and installed a lively editor. But there is almost certainly a double edge (as there is to his recent £5m investment in Coventry FC: the cash is earmarked to bring on young players and Robinson gets a cut of the transfer fee if they are sold). The crunch for new Labour could come early – over public sector pay, over tax, over a European single currency. If Brown and Blair did split, the voice of the new, improved *New Statesman* might be potent.

The integrity of Ian Hargreaves might prove a stumbling block to a partisan proprietorial position. But their editors can always be sacked. For the time being, Geoffrey Robinson is a man to be carefully watched.

Dangerous

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When twigs were twogs and the silly song ruled

Bill Bailey is a one-off," wrote James Rampton in the Comedy section of this paper's Eye magazine on Saturday. "There is no other performer on earth who would think of playing *Three Blind Mice* in the style of Richard Clayderman..."

It is always dangerous to say sweeping things like that, as I have found to my cost in the past, because there will always be some over-informed reader who will write in and point out some glaring exception to your rule. In James Rampton's case I am afraid it is going to be me, because I can think of one other performer on earth who might think of playing *Three Blind Mice* in the style of Richard Clayderman, and that is John Dankworth.

Not only would John Dankworth be capable of it, but he has done it. He once made a record of that very tune, *Three Blind Mice*, in which he parodied not just one but half a dozen different people.

Richard Clayderman was not one of them, because in the 1950s, when he made the record, Clayderman was not a household name, perhaps not

even born. Dankworth chose to arrange the tune in the style of different top jazz names of the time, such as Gerry Mulligan and the Modern Jazz Quartet, and if you were a jazz fan it was a very funny record, especially the section where he played the nursery rhyme in the pretentious style of Stan Kenton, renaming this section "A Trio of Sighless Rodents".

This being the 1950s, the number came out on a 78rpm record and was, I think, a modest hit for Johnny Dankworth, as he then was – at any rate, you can still find the record in some quantities in places where they still sell old 78 records.

I don't suppose James Rampton was around in those days, so he can be forgiven for being knocked out by the exciting new idea of a musical parody using *Three Blind Mice*.

In fact, if you are a reviewer of comedians these days, there is no particular reason why you should connect music and comedy at all, which is extraordinary. When you think of the place the comic song had in our culture for so long, the music hall and the comic song were



Miles Kington

almost synonymous, and Gilbert and Sullivan weren't half bad either, but even when the music hall had faded away the idea of the comic song persisted. The line continued through the Western Brothers, and Arthur Askey, and Noel Coward, and Paddy Roberts, and Flanders and Swann, and ...

What happened to it after that? Where did it go?

I grew up in a house full of old 78s of songs, some classical, a lot by Bing Crosby and a good few by comic performers such as Arthur Askey and Frank Crumit. Because my Aunt

Peggy lived out in the Bahamas we also had records by Nassau's favourite calypso singer, Blind Blake, and one of the first songs I got to know by heart was a comic item about the Abdication: "It was love, love, love alone, Caused King Edward to leave de throne..."

While we are wandering through the swamps of childhood nostalgia, I realise now that I first heard of the name of millionaire JP Morgan through a Blind Blake song:

My name is Morgan, But it ain't no bank on Wall Street. That belongs to me. So forget your champagne appetite. 'Cos the best you'll get is beer tonight. My name is Morgan, But it ain't JP.

The point I'm getting round to is that we don't seem to breed songs like that any more. Is there anyone around who makes a living out of singing funny songs, or is famous for singing funny songs, or has had a hit with a funny song recently? In the cabaret world there's Kit and the Widow, I suppose, and

Instant Sunshine, but there's nobody in mainstream comedy that I can think of off-hand who sings comical. Is it our culture that has decided to eliminate the comic song? Is it the industry that now makes it impossible for people to have one-off hits like "The Laughing Policeman" or Sophie Tucker's "Life Begins at Forty", or Leslie Holmes's "He Played His Ukulele as The Ship Went Down"? When Arthur Askey sang, in his voice of the new, improved *New Statesman* might be potent.

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I wish I were a tiny bird, I'd sing through sun and fog. I'd lightly trip from twig to twig, And back from twog to twog. Oh, I would be a chronic little bird, Cyclonic little bird, Carry-onic little bird, A let's have another gig-and-tonic little bird. What lives up in the sky ...

When Arthur Askey was writing such deathless lyrics, it never occurred to him that one day nobody would be singing any silly songs at all. I only hope some over-informed reader will write and tell me I am quite wrong.

A triumph of business and lunch

Andrea Whittam Smith

In the top 10 of the Internet, the best of the worst, American business, and...
100% VENDETTA

A triumph of business and lunch

DAVOS – Competitive business, the network society, monetary union, blah, blah, flexible labour markets, the pensions time-bomb, currency stability, blah, blah, cybermoney, globalisation, blah, blah, deepening financial crisis, blah, blah, the yen-dollar exchange rate, systemic financial risk, blah, blah, blah, yawn.

Meanwhile, outside the air-conditioned, sanitised, seemingly underground and off-the-businesslike Swiss conference centre, the mountains and the snow-covered slopes beckon. The sun is shining, the air is pristine clean and the cloudless sky so blue you can almost feel the proximity of the stars.

This is Davos, a ski resort in the Swiss Alps, which anno-



Jeremy Warner

ally at this time of year plays host to the World Economic Forum, Europe's premier networking conference for businessmen and politicians.

For some, the temptation of the slopes proves too strong and a week that began filled with good intentions, an early morning rise and the frantic writing up of notes on all those burning global issues gives way to a good old-fashioned skiing holiday. For others, hobnobbing with leading business and political leaders, getting up to date on all the latest corporate and market trends, what it's all about and their time is spent in an orgy of back-to-back meetings and conference sessions.

Whatever his fancy, the businessman goes away from the World Economic Forum feeling that much better about himself, the world, his company and life in general. As well he might, having spent upwards of £15,000 of his company's money to be here.

This is a conference divided into those who pay (the great bulk), those who don't pay (the experts in their field and the media), and those who get paid (the moderators whose job it is to liven up the sessions, summarise, be provocative and amusing). The sessions, lunches and dinners range from the obvious – the impact of the euro on business, Japan's economic crisis, the Internet society and the like – to the faintly irrelevant – power couples, genetic testing, development of the brain, global warming, and various other outpourings of popular sci-



The electric smile: Michael Portillo in the Wirral South constituency. Each supporter he encounters is greeted warmly as One of Us

Photograph: Brian Harris

It is fashionable to say the big parties are the same now. The Wirral proves otherwise

A much meaner tribe

They're all the same, all the same, all the same," said an angry old woman in a white felt hat. She was watching Michael Portillo perched on a bench inside the bus shelter in the town centre of Heswall, in the constituency of Wirral South, where the by-election will be called today. Beaming and mugging for the cameras, tossing his quiff, he had a well-tailored arm draped patronisingly round the gawky local candidate. The woman, a non-voter, shook her head in disgust at the spectacle.

There's nothing to decide here, other than who you go to lunch with, for this is in essence just a high-powered talking shop. But talk has its uses. Ian Harvey, chief executive of BTG, the patent protection group, comes because in a few days he can get through more meetings with contacts and clients than several months of international travel would achieve. One of the sessions a few years back – on visionary companies – provided the basis for a whole new strategy and culture for his company (which, by the way, was the best-performing share on the London stock market last year).

Even John Neill, chief executive of Unipart and an unreconstructed Eurosceptic, finds an unlikely platform here to sound off, as only he can, on the iniquities of the Social Chapter.

It is hard to know whether the conference's reputation for deal-making is any more than just hype, but behind the official programme there is a raft of other sessions – constant progress where transactions and strategies are at least conceived, even if they are never acted upon.

The conference has also been responsible for some genuine international initiatives and reconciliations. The World Trade Organisation, for instance, grew out of discussions initiated at Davos.

Now about lunch ... there's a nice little mountain restaurant about halfway down that genteel blue run to Klosters...

wind of his breath. "Ah yes!" "Ye-es!" "Absolutely yes!" they murmur, a soughing of satisfaction rippling through the gathering to the clink of tea cups and crystal sherry glasses. How it teases talk of law and order, loyalty and royalty. How it croons to them of assisted places, grammar schools and prisons – and the constant refrain of Danger! Danger! Danger! The threat is to Ours, Us, People Like Us. Nice People with Nice Habits. Our Tribe.

Strolling down the Heswall shopping street or here in the house of the faithful, he was among his own kind, well away from Labour's tribal lands, the council estates of Bromborough or the western wards. The Defence Secretary knows his own because Tony faces light up to him as they see his shimmering celebrity approach them in the street. (Others, not his kind, turn sharply away.) Perhaps it is the fruity voice, the hair or the electric smile – but what please most is the tribal confidence with which he welcomes each one of them warmly as One of Us.

What is it to be One of Them? I stopped and asked a score of dazed admirers in his wake, why are you a Conservative? First they look astonished by the daft question. Why breathe? Why live? "I always have been, all my family, always," one says, and is then stumped – the first response is always from the tribal gut. Aileen Scales in the house meeting replied smartly, "My great-great-grandfather worked for Lord Derby in Liverpool. My grandfather worked for Joseph Chamberlain. All my family has been Conservative for ever!"

No, it is not a simple matter of class, though class comes into it. As it happens, if asked to pick out the Wirral South Labour and Tory candidates from an identity parade, most would get it wrong: Les Byrom, the Tory leader of Sefton council, a surveyor by profession, is secondary-modern educated, badly dressed, talks with a Merseyside accent (where they call Blair Blurr), has a bit

of a charisma deficit and makes appalling jokes. Ben Chapman for Labour is dapper in a double-breasted navy blue pinstripe suit and dippy black monocle. Speaks BBC RP. Has been a diplomat in China for many years, was head of the DTI for the region until recently and is so new Labour that he only joined the party nine months ago.

David Blunkett has been down here to swear his allegiance in blood to the wonderful grammar schools of the Wirral, because the 'lones are blitzing the place with stories that Labour will turn them all comprehensive. Hard to know who is lying the hardest.

As it happens the Tory candidate was a victim of the grammar school system. By the bus shelter, watching Portillo, were some 15-year-olds who had also failed the 11-plus. Did it hurt? Yes, badly, painfully, when their friends whisked off to grammar school. Did failing hurt Les Byrom? He turned glassy eyed when I asked him to cast his mind back: "I don't remember." As if. Everyone remembers that, for ever. That is why supporting the grammar schools may not be good policy – two-thirds of the children here fail and are cast among the goats. But never mind. People Like Us believe in the selection of the fittest. People Like Us just assume that it will be Our children that get selected.

No, the real but never spoken reason that People Like Us vote Conservative is because they want to hold on to what they have got, get more, and give nothing to anyone else – except their old clothes to the charity shop. The Conservative tribe is the clan of

Haves and Wannabees. Meanness of spirit is their guide, suspicion of others, a desire to stop things, lock people up, shut out the poor, build partitions and blame the underdog. It was ever thus.

On the other side – Labour or Lib Dem – are those who try to be nicer than them. To be sure, large numbers may vote out of class self-interest – Labour has always done more for the lower-income groups and no doubt will try to do so again. But all through the ranks of the Labour/Lib Dem tribes the talk is of higher things, of generosity, concern, projects for the improvement of society, aspirations and good intentions.

The problem for Labour is how to pretend to be like them. It isn't easy because the Tory tribe knows its own, and they can smell out this Labour lamb in wolf's clothing. For all their Tory policies, new Labour, thank God, just is not Tory, however much it tries to grow and bark and howl like them. No doubt Labour is set to win the Wirral for there are plenty of angry Tory voters there who want to give their own party a kicking for inchoate and essentially illogical reasons – Major here fail and are cast among the goats. But never mind. People Like Us believe in the selection of the fittest. People Like Us just assume that it will be Our children that get selected.

Faced with this the company agreed to make refunds on a specified basis, and it accepted that for the time being any company advertising must "clearly and conspicuously" state that customers may encounter delays when going on-line.

The company's first response was hard-nosed to a fault. It would suspend its television advertising campaign; this saves America Online lots of money but is literally of no interest to existing subscribers. It would increase its spending on system capacity from \$250m to \$350m; this will take months to make a difference. And it would add a further 600 customer support representatives to the 3,500 already in the field – so customers are more likely to find somebody to whom they can complain. As for compensation for losses – that would be considered on a case-by-case basis. In other words, the company was going to make it as hard as possible for subscribers to get any money back.

This misery response was quickly swept aside. Frustrated customers reached for their lawyers. They swiftly brought the company to a more reasonable position. The attorneys-general of more than 30 US states worked together to secure a settlement. They

Dangerous days on the cyberfrontier



Andreas Whittam Smith

In the new world of the Internet, the best and the worst of American business is on view

size to a television network's. Then and only then would come the big reward – abundant, lucrative advertising on AOL's service. Even though its customer base has risen from 150,000 subscribers five years ago, it remains a long way short of its objective.

I first thought there was something wrong last autumn when the company was forced to recalculate its profit-and-loss account. It had not been fully counting as a running cost its heavy spending on advertising. When this was done, contrary to what had previously appeared, it turned out that this celebrated company had never made a genuine profit, not a single cent. In effect, shareholders had always made good its deficits. The share price halved.

Then last December, America Online went for broke. Much smaller competitors had introduced a new charging system that provided unlimited access to the Internet in return for a flat fee. (This remains an industry in which small companies often provide a better service than the market leaders and still survive. This is true even of assembling computers.) The giant felt it must respond aggressively. AOL matched the flat fee tariff and launched an advertising blitz. Relying on the fact that local

calls in the US are free, it told potential subscribers: "No more watching the clock or rushing off-line to beat the charges, you can stay on-line as long as you want."

For a week or two, it looked as if the new tactics were succeeding. Whereas last summer the company's subscribers had been spending 30 million hours a month hooked up to the service, in December 102 million hours were recorded. And an additional 500,000 customers were signed up during that month alone. Then disaster struck.

America Online was not able to handle the tidal wave of custom it had generated. Many subscribers could not get through. This was not just frustrating for Web surfers. Small businesses found that they could not retrieve their e-mail – nor could they quickly switch to a rival service because the business cards they had been handing out carried their AOL e-mail address. They lost orders. They became desperate. The chairman of the company, Steve Case, had to write to subscribers to retreat from the recent advertising message. He said that many users were worried about not being able to get on the network that they were simply staying on all the time. "While that is under-

standable at one level", Mr Case wrote, "it is obviously problematical at another."

AOL's attempt at stabilising the situation deservedly failed. What happened demonstrated both the worst and the best of the American way of doing business.

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This misery response was quickly swept aside. Frustrated customers reached for their lawyers. They swiftly brought the company to a more reasonable position. The attorneys-general of more than 30 US states worked together to secure a settlement. They

made it plain that, in their view, AOL's aggressive marketing campaign, combined with the frequent failure to supply the advertised new service, amounted to deceptive business practice.

Faced with this the company agreed to make refunds on a specified basis, and it accepted that for the time being any company advertising must "clearly and conspicuously" state that customers may encounter delays when going on-line.

Thus without much ado, without fresh legislation, legally enforced consumer protection was swiftly brought into the frontier territories of cyberspace. It is fashionable here to decry the litigious nature of American business practice. But it is inconceivable that UK law could have been brought to bear on a similar problem of consumer abuse so swiftly and effectively.

As for America Online, its chairman remains unrepentant: "When the dust settles, I believe America Online will be recognised as a service that can handle millions of people and that millions want to use. And pricing for unlimited use is part of reaching a mainstream audience." That's *chutzpah*, Yiddish for shameless audacity or gall. The ancient Greeks also had a word for it – *hubris*.

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obituaries / gazette

Mollie Panter-Downes

A Londoner by birth, Mollie Panter-Downes was a *New Yorker* writer for 50 years. In the 1930s she sold the magazine a few poems, some short stories, and a piece about Jewish refugee children coming to England. In 1939, with war approaching, Harold Ross, the editor, was desperate to find a London correspondent, and his fiction editor, the redoubtable Katherine White, suggested Panter-Downes.

On September, a cable arrived at Roppelegh's, the old house where she, her husband Clare Robinson, and their two small daughters lived in the Surrey countryside near Haslemere, asking her to try doing a regular "Letter from London". Panter-Downes cabled back: sorry, evacuees were being billeted on her, no time for writing. But then the evacuees were cancelled – Roppelegh's was in the backwoods, too far from the local school – and Panter-Downes cabled again: yes, she'd worked a go. The arrangement worked out.

Thereafter, weekly or fortnightly, for the duration, a London "Letter" came out of Roppelegh's. Robinson was in the Gunners, a nanny helped with the children. Panter-Downes went up to town for several days mid-week, staying at the Lansdowne Club, and then back home put together some 1,500 words. The typed copy was taken several miles to the nearest station, often by Panter-Downes herself on a bicycle, and given to the train guard who at Waterloo handed it to a Western Union representative for cableing to New York. There it needed almost no editing – Panter-Downes's writing, even when not sent by cable, was concise.

So the readers of the *New Yorker* learnt about the war in England, from the Dad's Army days to rockets. They read of the notable plum crop of 1939, the evacuation of pets as well as children, the introduction of the wheatmeal loaf. She didn't skip the bad news – in her piece of 19 May 1940, she wrote: "It is now clear to the man in the street, reading his paper as he goes home to the neat suburban villa which may soon be matchwood, like the villas near Rotterdam and Brussels, that Hitler is out to win the next six or eight weeks by any means he can, several of which will be bad for the population of this island." In 1940 she foresaw a four-year war. Although present about Churchill's gift for leadership, she was later caustic about his hostility to criticism and failure to get rid of dead wood in his team. She presented the difficulties not just in terms of losses of ships or of Libyan territory but, when rubber-growing Malaya fell and January 1942 was pipe-bursting cold, in terms of no more hot-water bottles.

The effect her Letters had in Washington pre-December 1941 can only have been useful. The British temper, whether displayed in early stocks to what she called the sahib mentality, or in the buoyant response to the straight talking of Sir Stafford Cripps, found a splendid spokesperson in Mollie Panter-Downes. Weather re-

ports might have been forbidden in England, as useful to the enemy, but *New Yorker* readers learned, a week late, whether the sun shone or rain fell in London. In the bad moments she retained her humour, but also in the best: "In the spring, a young or old Englishman's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of invasion." Those thoughts had of course come in 1940, but this was 1942 when we were beginning to think of invading them.

A reader today of Panter-Downes's war Letters is taken back to the blackout, to gin in short supply and not much coal in the scuttle – which, if brass, no longer had a maid to clean it. She notes the Harrods-going bourgeoisie, as short of coupons as anyone, forced to buy second-hand clothes. Occasionally her desire to give voice to the people of all classes – arch-Cockneyisms overhead in bars and buses – produces what now sounds like patter for *New Yorker* Holloway, but her willingness to seek out working-class Londoners was evident in a self-effacing report about the family of a Wapping dustman severely times bombed out, lastly by a V-1 in 1944. In the fine *New*

Yesterdays, which included Janet Flanner, Rebecca West and A.J. Liebling, she held her place.

Her father, a colonel in the Royal Irish Regiment, was killed at Mons early in the First World War. She and her mother lived first in Brighton and then in a Sussex village, with not much money. Seeking independence, she wrote stories and poems. Her first book was a love story, *The Shoreless Sea*, written in 1922 when she was 16, serialised by the *Daily Mail* and published by John Murray a year later; it was reprinted seven times. In 1946 she wrote *One Fine Day* – "turning the pillow", in Virginia Woolf's words, from much fact to fiction. It is ultimately a more serene book than Woolf could have written: an evocation of a single day in the life of an upper-middle-class housewife, a youngish woman going grey, shopping for groceries, worrying about husband and child, worrying about the house and garden. Its unity and perfect limp tone convey not only a world on the point of being lost but also the radiance of coming through the war. "We are at peace," thinks Laura Marshall, when she ends the sun-filled day on top of a Sussex down. "We still stand."

Panter-Downes went on writing "Letter from London" into the 1980s. She wrote reporter

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No longer the economic bellwether, ICI faces a long, hard slog

Is the worst over for Imperial Chemical Industries, once a bellwether group but now a rather pale shadow of its old self?

This week it is due to produce its year's results; they will be poor, probably not much above £500m against £951m in the previous year.

Few dispute that ICI is a well run company and has admirable defensive qualities. Its sad underperformance stems more from factors beyond its management's control, such as a tough trading environment and the eroding impact of the powerful pound.

The dividend should be lifted by 7 per cent to 32p, although in real values the payment will be lower than in 1979.

In group terms ICI's management must feel rather rueful when looking back at the decision, largely prompted by the unwelcome attentions of

Lord Hanson, to demerge its Zeneca drugs business.

From a shareholder standpoint it was a brilliant move. As a stand-alone company Zeneca's merits as a powerful and successful player were there for all to see and its shares, valued at 600p for the split, have soared into the stratosphere. On Friday they reached yet another peak 1,804.5p.

In contrast, poor old ICI has put on a much more subdued performance. True, its shares have made progress since the break up, but in more recent times their direction has been mostly downhill with the price (754.5p) a long way from the 954p peak, established early last year.

It could be argued that the removal of Zeneca took away ICI's glamour. And it also left it stuck in mature, uncompromising markets where growth is hard to achieve and

anything remotely spectacular is as likely as old English sheepdogs losing their appeal.

Bulk chemicals, explosives and paints are hardly a cocktail for growth in the present climate; so even if ICI is the worst it's going to be a long, hard slog with only modest rewards.

Some think the group's future is bleak. There is a school of City thought that profits will reach around £750m next year, then sag towards £400m when the world is celebrating the millennium. Strong sterling, overcapacity and little world-wide economic growth are the factors cited for ICI's future discomfort.

It could, of course, change the market's perception by barging into new areas, perhaps launching a takeover bid. Its last big move was in the 1960s (£545m) a long way from the 954p peak, established early last year.

Certainly ICI is beginning to look as if it must stir itself - if

it doesn't it will find a predator snapping at its heels.

For years its performance was seen as a rough and ready guide to the state of the nation's economy. Its quarterly figures were an important event in the investment calendar, often a significant influence on the direction of the stock market. They are still important but ICI is now a supporting player, the 40th-ranked Footsie constituent with a market capitalisation of £5.4bn.

It lags behind two other blue chips reporting this week, BT and BSkyB, and is level pegging with the fourth, BAA.

BT, like ICI, will produce its figures on Thursday - the favourite reporting day for many top groups. ICI can, however, point to tradition for its penchant for a Thursday. BT, as a newcomer, merely hopped on the bandwagon.

Thursday's popularity stems from rather more leisurely times when the great and the good would journey from their country retreats to attend board meetings in the City.

For non-executive directors a week in London for a meeting held certain attractions. They could leave home on Monday, spending Tuesday doing what non-execs away from home like to do, attend meetings on Wednesday to rubber stamp the decisions of the working directors and then, on Thursday or Friday, make their way home.

The results of the Wednesday meeting are made known early on Thursday, although there have been odd occasions when results inadvertently slipped out on a Wednesday.

BT should manage a near 7 per cent profit gain to £885m in its third quarter.

Analysts note that when presenting its interim results in November, it was in its most

optimistic mood for years. Another rosy display is expected. Year's profits should come in at £3.1bn against a shade above £3bn.

It is unlikely that BT will have much to say about its planned £1.5bn merger with US group MCI. The proposed get-together is currently bogged down in the creaky negotiations which engulf every big deal these days and is attracting the attention of an array of regulatory bodies.

The market view is that despite the howls from competitors and the scrutiny from London, Washington and Brussels the deal will get the go-ahead.

However, whether to develop in the US market is a matter of some conjecture. There is a feeling in some quarters that it is already well placed in the vast US telephone arena to take advantage of a rising trend. Nine-month figures of £392m compared with £361m is the expectation.



STOCK MARKET WEEK

DEREK PAIN
Stock market reporter
of the year

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business & city

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ScotAm scorns 'stop the clock' plea

**Clifford German
and Chris Godsmark**

Scottish Amicable, the life insurer, yesterday rejected as "sheer lunacy" a demand from Abbey National that it postpone its controversial plans to end its mutual status as the war of words between the two sides intensified.

Abbey's call came after Scot-Am executives, led by chairman Sandy Stewart, rejected the banking group's surprise £1.4bn takeover offer, prompting speculation of a bidding scramble by rival suitors.

Printing and posting documents to its 1.1 million policyholders could cost at least £1.5m, Abbey said, and might have to be repeated several times if a contested bid battle developed. An Abbey spokesman said: "As far as we're concerned it is in the best interests of policyholders for ScotAm stop the clock and propose the stop-off offer."

As pressure mounted on ScotAm's board last night, a mass of new names were being thrown into the ring as possible bidders. Prudential, the UK insurance giant and Allianz of

Germany are now known to have made approaches, though at this stage they are thought to be tentative.

Other potential suitors include ING of the Netherlands, and Australia-based AMP, which already owns Pearl Assurance and London Life. AMP has talked of doubling its UK business over the next five years. Valuations of up to £2bn have already been bandied about in connection with ScotAm.

ScotAm last night published Abbey's request that work on the circular documents to policyholders outlining the demu-

nification plans be put on hold. "It's hysteria. This is sheer lunacy," said a source. "They cannot seriously believe that a few hundred pounds is enough to persuade our policyholders to drop everything. This is a ploy by Abbey to destabilise our own proposals. We've yet to see a sensible offer from them."

Abbey responded furiously:

"If we haven't put an offer to them then what on earth were directors rejecting last Thursday night when they vetoed our proposals?"

A key factor is likely to be

whether three investment trusts

investing in Scottish Amicable with-profits policies decide to press for a special meeting of rebel policyholders if directors refuse to enter into serious talks with Abbey or other bidders. One of the trusts, Scottish Value Management, has already said it wants to see full details of all rival proposals before taking a decision on ScotAm's plans.

Abbey National trumped ScotAm's own proposals to abandon mutual status in May and embark on a leisurely process towards floating in three to five years' time,

rewarding policyholders with average bonuses of £250, credited to the value of their policies. Abbey National has offered an average of £360, payable upfront in cash or shares, and looks set to go higher if rivals come forward.

The terms and conditions offered to Scottish Amicable's executives and staff will also play a part. Abbey's policy was it floated in 1988 and again when it took over the N&P building society last year has been to delay the offer of options to executives for two years, but other bidders may be more generous.

ScotAm's own proposals would share £14m between the executives and a further £20m among the 2,000 staff.

Corporate finance departments around the City are anticipating a race to bid for the dwindling band of mutual insurance companies, bringing a fee bonanza for firms who pick up lucrative contracts to advise bidders and defend the victims. Apart from Scottish Amicable, Scottish Life, Scottish Provident and Friends Provident are all potential targets, and demand could spill over into quoted insurance companies.

Imports in front as car sales surge

Chris Godsmark

The continuing boom in car imports into the UK fuelled a strong increase in sales last month, though Ford's slice of the crucial British market fell again, manufacturers will reveal this week.

Early indications from industry sources suggest more than 200,000 cars were registered in January, a rise of some 4.5 per cent on the same month in 1996, making it the strongest January since 1990. The official statistics will be released on Thursday by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders.

However, January was a bad month for traditional high-selling "British" makes. Ford's share is thought to have slid alarmingly to 19 per cent, down from 21.7 per cent in January the previous year. Rover managed 9.6 per cent of the UK market, more than 1 percentage point down.

One industry expert said: "January will be a real test of Ford's new policy of not distorting the market by registering large numbers of cars to dealers in the last couple of days of each month. If they end up with figures as bad as this it'll prove they've given up buying market share."

The winners in the sales league last month were imported makes such as Volkswagen, which is currently enjoying an extraordinary surge in popularity in Britain, along with Renault and Fiat. Last year imports accounted for 62 per cent of the UK market, up from 58.9 per cent in 1995.

The statistics make bleak reading for Ford unions as workers prepare to vote in strike ballots called over the company's plans to slash 1,300 jobs at its Halewood plant on Merseyside. Union officials from across Ford's European empire meet in Brussels today to discuss the cutbacks at the start of a week of frantic lobbying.

Tony Woodley, national organiser for the Transport and General Workers Union, said: "We are hoping our European colleagues will come out with a common position and will offer to share some of the grief. They've done it before." On Thursday Ford's British unions will meet, as Nasser, head of the group's European operations, which lost a total of £180m last year.

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British Gas £50 call-out angers rivals

Chris Godsmark
Business Correspondent

British Gas has become embroiled in a new row with rival suppliers, this time over the costs of administering pre-payment meters in poorer households, which the Gas Consumers Council has warned could threaten the success of domestic competition.

Suppliers have been asked by British Gas to pay £50 for each emergency visit it has to make to homes with pre-payment meters, which are managed by TransCo, the company's pipeline division. Managers have become alarmed at the rising cost of administering the system, called Quantum, which is used by 800,000 households in the UK.

Under the system, customers charge up a smart-card with gas units at Post Offices instead of feeding coins into meters. Last year Quantum homes were responsible for 124,000 emergency call-outs, many of which are claimed to have been unnecessary. The new charge could net British Gas more than £5m a year in extra revenue.

"There are some people with pre-payment meters who think they can get some extra gas by calling TransCo out. We have to run an emergency service which is cost-effective," said a TransCo spokeswoman.

However, new gas suppliers stampeding into the competitive residential market claim the call-out fee will wipe out any profit made from pre-payment customers. In trials of domestic competition in the South-west,

prices offered for Quantum homes have been around 20 per cent higher than those for ordinary households.

The Gas Consumers Council has warned that the fee would encourage new entrants into the competitive market to "cherry pick" the best customers. The GCC is already concerned about the marketing frenzy under way in the second set of trial areas, where several companies are engaged in doorstep selling campaigns. Competition starts in Avon and Dorset next week and in Kent and Sussex from March.

Under licences issued by Ofgas, the industry regulator, new suppliers have to offer gas to any customer, regardless of income. Sue Slipman, GCC director, explained: "We know that cherry picking is happening and as soon as we get evidence we'll catch these companies out. This is a flagrant breach of licence conditions set by Ofgas."

One independent gas company, Calortex, has already raised concerns with TransCo about the call-out charge. Calortex, a joint venture between Calor and Texaco, has so far signed up 2,200 pre-payment meter customers in the South-west trial, some 80 per cent of all those Quantum households who have switched from British Gas.

Tomorrow the Office of Fair Trading is to hold a private conference with Ofgas and other industry experts to discuss the marketing problem. Ofgas has so far rejected the GCC's call for it to police a mandatory code of practice.

The electricity watchdog, Ofgem, has also agreed to attend the gathering.

Nationwide may offer Internet service

Nic Cuthill
Personal Finance Editor

Nationwide Building Society is considering plans to set up an Internet service provider, challenging existing commercial providers who traditionally control access to the world-wide web.

Among the options being considered by the society are the offer of free or cheap access to its members, possibly restricting

the service to certain customers.

But it has not ruled out mounting a direct challenge to service providers, such as Pipex, Virgin or Demon, by marketing cheap access to the Internet to all potential clients.

It moves raises the prospect of a bitter price war, as increasing numbers of institutions move to challenge existing providers by offering access as a simple bolt-on service.

Telecom has already incurred the wrath of BT's lawyers. Now a member of the public from Leeds is believed to have complained about the new slogan to the authority. An ASA spokeswoman said: "Our code of practice makes clear that

advertisers cannot denigrate their opponents or unfairly attack or discredit other businesses. You also cannot exploit the goodwill attached to a trademark." Bell Cablemedia was unavailable for comment.

Photograph: Emma Boam

Ministers in dole queue wrangle

Diane Coyle
Economics Editor

Officials at the Department of Employment have come under pressure from ministers to make a positive gloss put on unemployment figures due to be released next week.

Employment Minister Gillian Shepherd is said to be concerned that the Government is not getting the credit for big drops in the number of people claiming unemployment benefit

because of the widespread view that the figures are fiddled.

Officials have held several meetings to discuss the issue in the past two weeks.

The news has emerged days after a row over the withdrawal of a chart showing NHS spending falling rather than rising in real terms from the annual statistical reference book *Social Trends*. The publication is not to be released until a new chart can be included.

A government decision in

October not to authorise a more reliable series of unemployment statistics, based on a monthly survey, but instead to stick to the claimant count, has backfired. Since the decision, which flew in the face of all expert advice, commentators have increasingly focused on the existing quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS).

Part of the reason is that the introduction of the Job Seekers' Allowance has distorted the claimant count by a large but

unknown amount during the last two months. The headline claimant total fell by more than 95,000 in November and 45,000 in December, well above the earlier trend of 15,000-30,000 a month.

When the first figure was published in mid-December, the Government was so troubled that five ministers – including the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Deputy Prime Minister – gave a hasty press conference to highlight the drop in unemployment. However, the Office for National Statistics said then that because of the uncertainties about special factors it was unable to provide its usual estimate of the unemployment trend for the second month running.

Critics of the Government were delighted – and ministers infuriated – that City experts and journalists opted to analyse the latest quarterly jobless figures, collected on the same basis as most other countries' statistics, rather than the claimant count.

Michael Dicks, UK economist at Lehman Brothers, reckons people will give the Chancellor the benefit of the doubt. But he too predicts that sterling will weaken and that market sentiment will turn sharply after the election.

Two reports published today predict sharper base rate rises later as a result of Mr Clarke's likely inaction. David Kern, chief economist at NatWest Bank, says: "The growing like-

Duncan Lewis, who quit as head of Granada's media division in December after a spectacular bust-up with Charles Allen, its chief executive, may be set for a return to the telecommunications industry with his old employer British Telecom.

The 45-year-old Mr Lewis is understood to have held informal discussions with the BT chairman Sir Iain Vallance about taking up a senior post within the company as it works towards the £25bn merger with MCI. He will be returning to the end of the year as deputy chief executive of BT, which only had four executives on its board before the merger with MCI.

Mr Lewis has worked for both Mercury and BT before – it was Sir Iain who brought him into the group. The two men are said to have had a good working relationship.

Friends say that Mr Lewis is weighing up three options – a return to BT, a job running an FTSE 100 company or launch-

ing a start-up venture on his own. But a return to BT is top of the agenda.

Industry observers say that a power vacuum may be developing at the top of Concert – the international telecoms company being formed out of BT's takeover of MCI, BT's biggest long-distance telephone operator.

Mr Alan Rudge is returning at the end of the year as deputy chief executive of BT, which only had four executives on its board before the merger with MCI.

There is speculation about how long the chairman of MCI, Bert Roberts, will remain on the board of the merged company given the enormous stock options that he is in line for. The deal will net him \$30m-\$60m according to some estimates.

Friends say that Mr Lewis is a respected figure in the industry. In 1995 he quit as chief executive of Mercury after just

nine months in the job. His departure from Granada came within a year of his appointment.

Mr Lewis's departure from his £200,000 job at Granada led to speculation that he would get the top job at Cable & Wireless Communications, the new company formed out of a £5bn merger of Mercury and three cable operators.

But the post went to another Granada executive, Graham Wallace, head of the group's restaurants interests.

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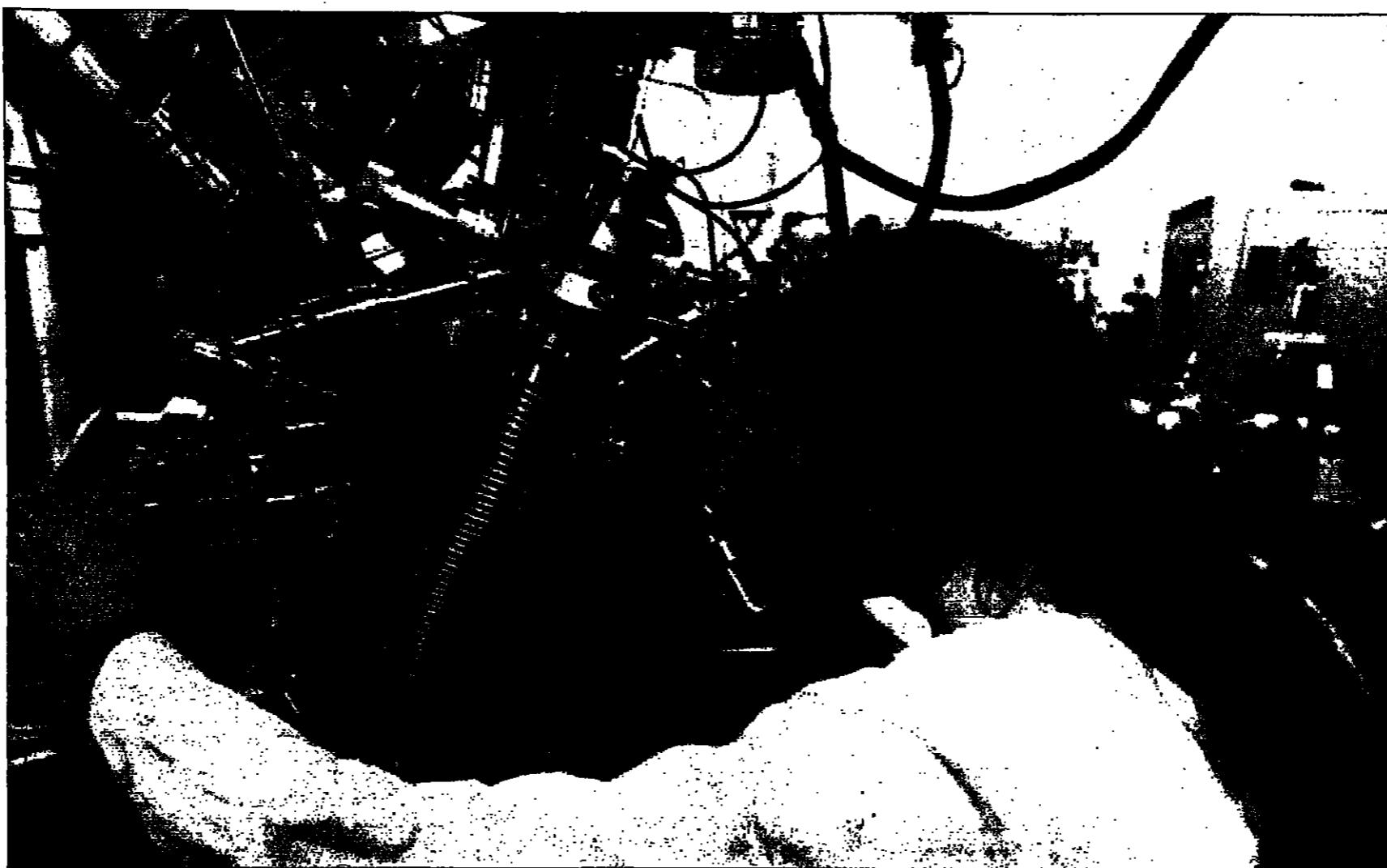
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science

Yes, it hurts. Yes, it works

Last week's science page criticised the Government's policy of selling research laboratories to the private sector. Ian Taylor, minister for science and technology, writes in its defence



Labs under the microscope: The National Physical Laboratory in Teddington carries out more research for less money

Photograph: Edward Sykes

Scrutiny, examination, change. These are the sort of words that may make us all feel uncomfortable. They can challenge our traditional way of doing things, prompt us to work out our real objectives, and sometimes lead towards better working habits. Although disturbing, the scrutiny process often brings rewards, and gives a new sense of direction.

It is fair to say that the 37 public-sector research establishments which have recently been under the government's Prior Options Review spotlight have found the process both disturbing and challenging. But as minister in charge of the process - which has just been formally completed - I am confident that the overall outcome will be a more efficient set of organisations, with a clear view of where they are going and who their key customers are. Our science base will benefit from the exercise.

As reported last Wednesday, my ministerial colleagues and I have just announced the remaining 28 decisions on the scientific bodies reviewed during 1996. For the establishments scrutinised under the full programme, the taxpayer contributes more than £690m each year to sustain their current work. That is more than 10 per cent of the total government expenditure on research and development. It is only right that the Government should make sure this money is spent effectively. The cost of undertaking the reviews has been small by comparison.

Budget-holding ministers are not the only ones who can

see the benefits of Prior Options reviews. One "parent" body for three of the laboratories - the Natural Environment Research Council - recently endorsed the need for periodic reviews, saying to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee that they "provide a valuable insight into the structure and operation of establishments, and challenge internal thinking" and "give a further opportunity to assess the customer-contractor relationship".

There has been a variety of outcomes from the reviews conducted on a case-by-case basis, which should reassure those who have accused the Government of seeking private sector solutions regardless of the nature of the establishments and their work. Many will remain in the public sector, though with emphasis on managerial reforms to improve a situation.

As for Charles Arthur's comments (*actually those of John Mulvey of Save British Science - C4*) on this page last week, we have indeed given appropriate weight to issues such as impartiality and reliability of scientific advice, as well as the money-related factors.

Staff at the laboratories will be pleased that the results are now out in the open. I was concerned to minimise the length of time taken by the reviews and encouraged the teams to work quickly to identify the key issues. But these were complex, and we wanted right answers rather than quick ones, and to look at each case on its merits. We also had to keep in mind the important

department has a medium-term contract to secure the vital research we need from NPL.

Nor is Britain alone here. Other countries are also refocusing the work of their public-sector research bodies. The US government is looking especially hard at the space agency Nasa, and the energy and health areas, while the Australian federal research organisation, CSIRO, is reforming its institutes to reduce bureaucracy. My team in the Office of Science and Technology has received a number of delegations from abroad, keen to learn how we have tackled these difficult issues.

Charles Arthur also mentioned the sale of the Building Research Establishment (BRE). Last Tuesday Robert Jones, the Minister for Construction, announced that the BRE management team has been selected as the preferred purchaser. Their bid best met all the Government's sales objectives. Careful consideration was given to the protection of impartiality and independence for which BRE is renowned. I am pleased that this bid has secured wide support from the construction industry and the research world.

No science minister can ignore the need to investigate whether the science base is operating efficiently or take action to halt mission drift. The Prior Options process is the sign of a responsible government, fully prepared to take all the necessary measures to maintain value for money and accountability in all areas of public spending.

theoretically...

Should scientists, like MPs, have to declare their financial interests in research? A study in *Science and Engineering Ethics* found that 34 per cent of the lead authors of 789 papers drawn from a range of journals had a financial interest in research being described. For example, the writers may have been listed as an inventor in a patent application, or as a shareholder of a company with commercial interests. But *Nature* reports critics saying that papers should be judged on the basis of the science they describe, not by authors' "alleged biases".

Students who learn through the Internet can get better results than those taught in a classroom, according to a Californian study reported in *New Scientist*. A class of 33 sociology students were divided into two groups for a statistics course; the online ones scored 20 per cent better in the exam, and had collaborated more in coursework.

More success for gene-hunters, who have now found a gene that causes glaucoma, one of the most common causes of blindness. Glaucoma affects up to two per cent of people over 40, and is actually a group of eye diseases that gradually damage the optic nerve, usually through raised internal pressure

caused by excess fluid inside the eye. Mutations in the gene, called TIGR, cause a rare but potentially devastating juvenile form of glaucoma, said a team from the University of Iowa College of Medicine, reporting in the journal *Science*. TIGR also seems to be responsible for about three per cent of adult cases, with other, unidentified genes contributing to the rest.

That's a relief. An Ariane-4 rocket lifted off successfully from Kourou last Thursday and placed American and Argentine satellites into orbit. But the commercial future of the more powerful Ariane-5 rockets - the first of which blew up carrying scientific experiments just 37 seconds into its maiden flight - is in doubt. A second experimental launch will not happen until July at the earliest.

An Indian heart surgeon who tried unsuccessfully to transplant a pig's heart into a human is in jail in Guwahati, Assam. The patient died soon after the operation, performed in December. Unlike the "xenotransplants" planned by a number of Western companies, the pig had no human genes, meaning the transplant would cause a massive immune rejection. The surgeon, Dhaniram Baruah, is charged with violating India's 1994 Organ Transplant Act. If guilty, he faces a fine of up to 10,000 rupees and five years in jail.

technoquest

Questions and answers provided by Science Line's Dial-a-Scientist on 0345 600444

Q Why don't stars appear in pictures from the Apollo landings on the Moon?

A The lunar surface is very bright, and reflects a lot of light. The television cameras on the Moon compensated for this by reducing the amount of light let through the lens. As a result, stars were not bright enough to be seen.

Q Why, if you shut one eye, do you still see in 3-D?

A You don't, really, but your brain supplies the missing information, so you get the impression that you are still seeing an image with depth. Depth perception still isn't fully understood, but our brain can use pictorial clues such as the angle an object covers on our retina. Other clues include the brightness of the object; if it is brighter, it will usually be nearer, light and shade can also be important. There are also physiological clues such as when you focus on something close, the shape of the actual lens changes. To check if you are really seeing in 3-D when you have one eye shut, try moving your head from side to side, or touching objects at varying distances.

Q How far does the Earth travel round the Sun?

A About 570 million miles (900 million kilometres). The first measurement was made by Aristarchus of Samos in about 270BC. He measured the position of the Sun relative to the Moon when the Moon was half full. From this, he worked out the distance to the Sun (since the Earth's orbit is nearly circular, the distance travelled is π multiplied by the radius). The number he got was 20 times too small, but very early astronomers often did worse.

Q Stars twinkle because of the Earth's atmosphere. Why don't planets?

A Stars are so distant that they appear as point sources of light, so any disturbance in the Earth's atmosphere is easily visible. Planets, being closer, appear more as a disc than a point of light. Any disturbance is less visible because if the central part of the image is distorted as it passes through the atmosphere, that distortion probably won't reach the edge of the disc - so the planet won't seem to twinkle.

Q What is the strongest plant fibre?

A A fibre called ramie is the strongest. Its fibres are eight times as strong as those of cotton.

Q Do fish blink?

A No. Like snakes, they don't have moveable eyelids. Instead, they have a transparent eye protector permanently in place. Fish have excellent eyesight and can see parts of the spectrum we can't. They rely heavily on visual signals for species recognition, choosing a mate and territorial defence.

You can also visit the *Technoquest* World Wide Web site at <http://www.campus.com/CampusWorld/pub/ScienceNet>

Questions for this column can be submitted by e-mail to char@vss.org

THE INDEPENDENT CROSSWORD

No. 3212. Monday 3 February
By Potts

28 Fighter's willing to break up a riot (9)

DOWN

- 1 Arrange dance music (5)
- 2 Begin working seriously to record turn over (3,4,2)
- 3 All point to just what's needed (10)
- 4 A chap goes in to fillet edible sea creature (7)
- 5 Many are seized by European land animal (7)
- 6 Bone created by low note (4)
- 7 External appearance of men, say (5)
- 8 Rubbish student essays about world power (3,6)
- 13 Fashionable society one takes a shine to? (10)
- 14 A pianist may play this game (9)
- 16 Alteration meant changing patch inside (9)
- 18 Cast contained German cloth (7)
- 19 Georgian lady? (7)
- 21 Plant found in African nature reserve (5)
- 23 Revolutionary device whichever way you look at it (5)
- 24 Took advantage of application date (4)
- 25 Old vessels sloshing about (9)
- 26 A man of means (5)
- 27 Dash up to dead antelope (5)
- 28 Finally, receiving key anyway (2-5)
- 15 Reason general secretary is out of routine (7)
- 17 Thorium is extracted from plant fibre (5)
- 20 Rita hoped to substitute Greek figure (9)
- 21 Self-righteous expression of delight (5-5)
- 22 Call on editorial trouble-maker (10)
- 23 Revolutionary device whichever way you look at it (5)
- 24 Took advantage of application date (4)
- 25 Old vessels sloshing about (9)
- 26 A man of means (5)
- 27 Dash up to dead antelope (5)

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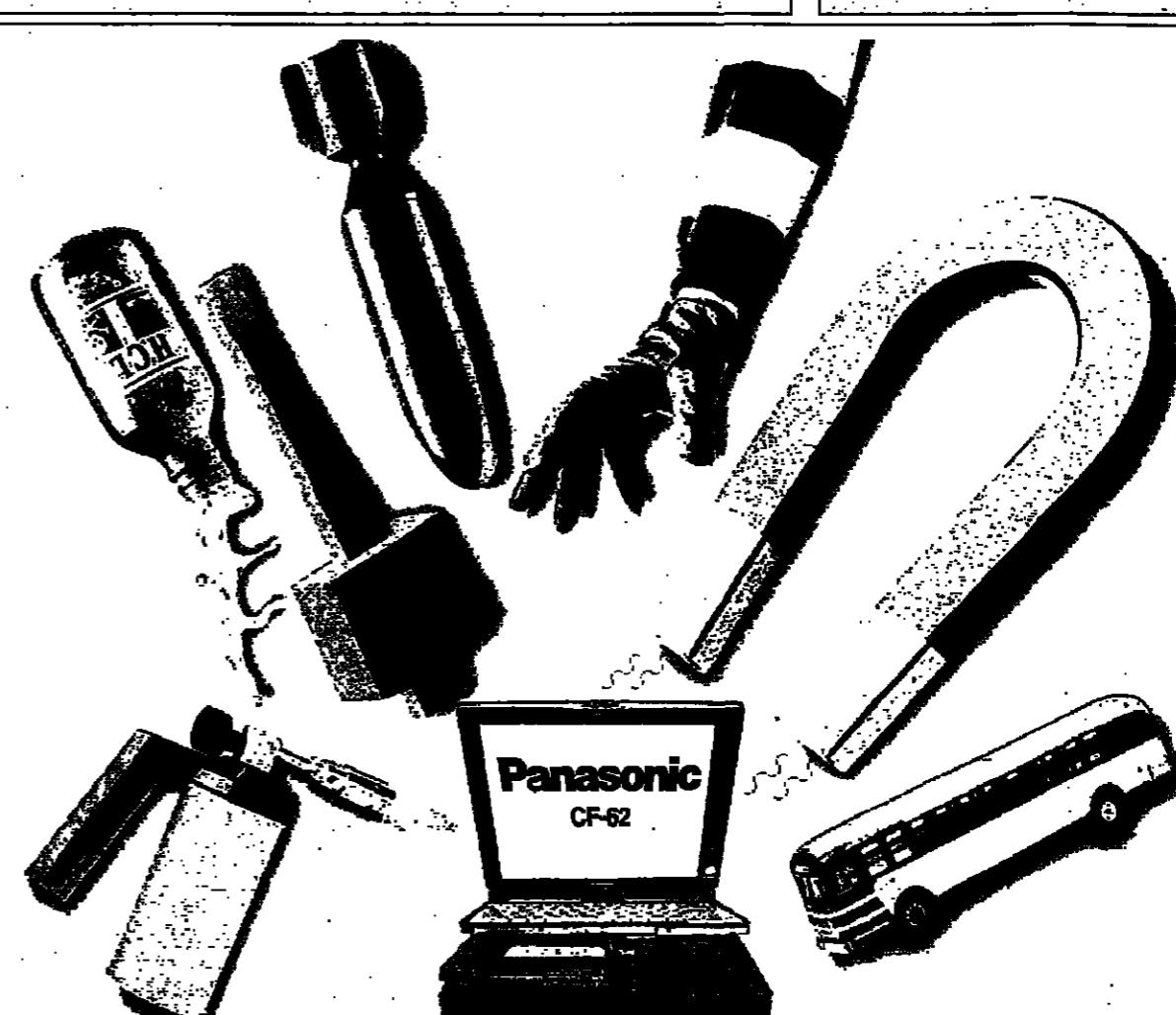
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